

**Toward a Theology of the Common Good and Christian Democratic Engagement**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it seeks to show Christians that the Christian political imagination provides good resources to reimagine a politics of the common good beyond the limitations of models of liberal politics that eschews theological questions about the ultimate good. Second, it contends that the integrity of Christians life hinges on active engagement in political life for the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalized in society. The central organizing idea is that a Christian account of the political can sustain a politics of liberation as well as the highest values of liberal democracy without compromising Christian particularity.

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## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it seeks to show Christians that a Christian political imagination provides good resources to reimagine a politics of the common good beyond the limitations of models of liberal politics that eschews theological questions about the ultimate good. Second, it contends that the integrity of Christians life hinges on active engagement in political life for the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalized in society. The central organizing idea is that a Christian account of the political can sustain a politics of liberation as well as the highest values of liberal democracy without compromising Christian particularity.<sup>1</sup>

To this end, this dissertation engages in what is commonly called political theology. However, political theology is a highly ambiguous field of inquiry. There are many approaches to doing political theology and scholars who defend rival methodologies are becoming increasingly polarized. For instance, one classic method of political theology is the liberationist approach most comprehensively outlined in Clodovis Boff's monumental *Theology and Praxis* and summarized in José Míguez Bonino's *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*.<sup>2</sup>

This method seeks to bring theology and social theory together as relatively autonomous fields of scientific inquiry. In order to bridge the two fields, liberationist political theologians must create a *mediating theory* that explains how theology should be related to the datum of socio-political analysis. For Boff, there is no obvious way to move from doctrines, theology, and

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<sup>1</sup> While this dissertation is apologetic in tone in that it seeks to justify a Christian position against several contending ones, it is primarily aimed at a Christian audience and not meant to show that Christianity is superior to other religious traditions or philosophies.

<sup>2</sup> Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981); José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (London: Fortress Press, 1983).

tradition to social praxis. Before one can theologize about politics, one must have some understanding of what is going on in the political realm—how it is organized conceptually, legally, and institutionally. Theologians who employ this methodology are often accused by others who defend a rival methodology of neglecting, as Paul Tillich argues in *Theology of Culture*, that the social is already theological, and theology is already social.<sup>3</sup>

To defend their accusation, critics of liberation theology are tempted to mine the liberationist literature to find instances where liberationists claim that any attempt to derive social praxis directly from theology and ecclesial practices is said to violate the integrity of the social sciences.<sup>4</sup> This claim is then taken to mean that theology and the church are subordinated to the metaphysical assumptions of modern sciences and the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> To develop this line of argument against liberation theology, this group of theologians cites the relative absence of ecclesiology in liberation theology as evidence that liberationists do not believe that the church has anything meaningful and practical to contribute to politics. At best, theology serves merely as a prop for whatever political ideology—such as Marxism—that liberationists already happen to espouse.

Stanley Hauerwas, William T. Cavanaugh, Robert W. Jenson, John Milbank, and recently Stephen D. Long are often associated with this alternative school of political theology. Following

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 26–27.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is not always clear which Enlightenment assumptions are to be rejected, since the Enlightenment is not a monolithic intellectual movement. See Stanley Hauerwas, “The Politics of Justice: Why Justice Is a Bad Idea for Christians,” in *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 50–61; D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 111–42; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 206–56.

Tillich, Jenson calls this approach the “theology of culture.”<sup>6</sup> These figures are often associated with the postliberal school of Christian theology. Postliberal theologians of culture are reluctant to affirm that there are autonomous realms of human life called “culture” and “economics” that can be separated from the rest, such as politics and religion. Rather, the word “culture” in “theology of culture” refers to a coherent system of human behavior constituted by mutually determining signs and social practices.<sup>7</sup> This approach assumes human social activities are always teleologically guided by assumptions about the ultimate good or the “last end.” Therefore, existing cultures always already embody a particular theological or metaphysical narrative, whether the culture is self-conscious about this fact or not. As a result, it is impossible for a culture or a particular model of social life to remain neutral vis-à-vis theology and metaphysics. The task of a postliberal theologian of culture is to prepare the church to speak the gospel in its time and place by uncovering the “ultimate concern” or theological narrative undergirding social practices of the larger society outside the church.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, this approach assumes that culture is intrinsically theological and that every social practice embodies a certain theological narrative. Milbank’s monumental *Theology and Social Theory* is one of many recent publications defending this position. For instance, the economic theory and practices of a given social order, Milbank points out, are always based on certain contingent assumptions about the source of economic value and conventional norms of exchange. These assumptions are themselves grounded in a metanarrative that delineates the

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<sup>6</sup> See Tillich, *Theology of Culture*; Robert W. Jenson, “Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): 323–29.

<sup>7</sup> Jenson, “Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity,” 199.

<sup>8</sup> Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 42; Robert W. Jenson, “Christ as Culture 3: Christ as Drama,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (April 2004): 199.

final (moral) end of economic life.<sup>9</sup> Economics is, in other words, as much a religious ritual as politics. Theologians who employ this method of political theology, therefore, do not treat secular social or cultural theories as either autonomous disciplines needing some form of theological mediation or immune to theological criticism. Rather, they assume theology already has a particular normative understanding of the social and a particular social praxis, embodied by the church and its rituals, and so can critically engage these disciplines on its own terms.<sup>10</sup> Thus, social practices are not to be judged primarily by secular social theories, but by the theological narrative undergirding them.

This dissertation presupposes that both schools have something important to contribute to political theology and that the increasing polarization between them is for the most part unjustified. While it is true that many theologians in the liberationist tradition are not as ecclesiocentric as their colleagues in the theology of culture, the church, and Christian theological commitments do not by any means play only a subordinate role in political praxis for liberation theologians. Furthermore, the apparent subordinate role that church life plays in liberationist political imagination, even if true, is not logically necessitated by the liberationist methodology. Bonino, for instance, repeatedly cautions those who would build a Christian political ethics on the basis of secular theory and praxis alone. Bonino is adamant that secular political praxis and social theory still need to be properly critiqued and incorporated by a thoroughly Christian theological framework and church practices:

A purely secular social theory cannot, for Christians, take the place of a theological ethics of politics, because it cannot account for the peculiar perspective of faith. The result is that Christians committed to the political struggle lack an adequate understanding of what

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<sup>9</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 192–98.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99–102.



they are doing, an understanding that could make sense for their faith ... and their praxis is neither illumined nor qualified by their faith.<sup>11</sup>

Juan Luis Segundo and Boff both affirm Bonino's basic attitude.<sup>12</sup> It was, therefore, never Latin American liberation theology's intention to displace or replace Christian faith with secular theories. Rather, in advocating for the relative autonomy of social theory from theology, liberation theology is reminding theologians that Christian faith is always incarnated in a particular historical and social context that should weigh in on any attempt to do theology. A theologian simply cannot deduce the social context she inhabits from church doctrines and rituals.

In addition, the work of Milbank, Hauerwas, Cavanaugh, and Long are not devoid of socio-analytical mediation or even a critical appreciation of secular social theories. In *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank engages with Marx, Hegel, and other classical political economists at length in both a critical and qualified appreciative manner. His engagement with secular social theory then colors and informs his criticism of capitalism as well as liberal societies from the theological perspective. Cavanaugh's critical perspective on the nation-state depends on, to a large extent, his rigorous and thorough study of the history of the modern nation-state and engagement with secular political thinkers. This dependence does not entail that critical history and secular theory dictate Cavanaugh's theological task. Rather, history and secular theory prepares the political context of the nation-state for theological criticism and analysis. There is an important difference between learning from secular theories' insights and observations and conceding to their metaphysical underpinnings. In their harsh criticism of liberation theology,

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<sup>11</sup> Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, 48–49.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *A Community Called Church*, trans. John Drury, vol. I, *A Theology for the Artisans of a New Humanity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1980), 63–77; Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 24–34.

theologians of culture often neglect to see that they often make use of the very same methodology themselves.

Still, there are real theological disagreements between theologians in each methodological camp. This is, however, to be expected: no two theologians agree on every theological issue. But their disagreements do not arise from the methodology, but from theology. Theologically, the contemporary theologians of culture are more indebted to the theology of the patristic and medieval traditions, while liberation theologians tend to distance themselves from the scholastic tradition for, among others, historical and contextual reasons. For instance, from the standpoint of Latin American liberation theologians, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and its official form of Thomist personalism failed to grasp the seriousness of sinful social structures and how they corrode and undermine not only the material lives of the marginalized but also the very core of Christian spirituality.<sup>13</sup> The institutional church, for them, was still largely unaware that the social fault lines—whether it be class, gender, and race—cut through the heart of the ecclesial community and of the Catholic faith. In their theological reflections, they sought to remind Christians that the spiritual wellbeing of an individual Christian is not separable from the social structures within which she is situated.

Theologians of culture also have something important to teach us. At a time when the social implications of the Christian gospel are taken for granted, there is a real danger to reduce the Christian gospel to a tool of political organization and agitation. The rise of both the fundamentalist right and mainline Christians' theological apathy in the United States threatens the integrity of Christian political witness. Therefore, the fear of Milbank, Cavanaugh,

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<sup>13</sup> Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *Dialectic of Salvation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 139–55.

Hauerwas, and Long are not unjustified. In popular Christianity, there is an observable tendency to dilute the Christian faith and convert it into digestible slogans and simple-minded political causes.

Theologians of culture, therefore, fruitfully return to the classical sources of Christian faith in order to reclaim the theological depth of the tradition to help Christians direct their political passions. They are right that Christian political witness only makes sense if the Christian narrative is taken seriously in its particularity. Christian theology is done for Christians after all. They are also right that Christian tradition has something unique to contribute to politics if Christians are not just single-mindedly concerned about working with others—especially marginalized and oppressed others—for a common cause, important and proper as this may be, but are conscientious about cultivating the courage to speak in the public sphere precisely as Christians. This dissertation therefore incorporates the elements of both schools for the task of political theology. Theology should show how the Christian narrative might differ from the theological narratives governing existing political practices and demonstrate how the context of existing political practices might transform how Christian faith is incarnated by taking seriously the experiences of the poor and the marginalized.

The first task of this dissertation (Part One) is to examine the theological questions largely ignored by twentieth-century liberal and postliberal thought and the political ethos these theories seek to sustain in the United States. Here, liberal refers to positions traditionally associated with John Rawls and his social contract predecessors—a school of thought that eschews metaphysical questions and prioritizes the right over the good.<sup>14</sup> Postliberal refers to a

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<sup>14</sup> See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

contemporary political movement that seeks to move beyond the limits of liberalism, a movement sometimes called radical democracy or agonism. Its key figures include Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, William E. Connolly, and Romand Coles. This dissertation will focus on the latter two figures given their direct engagement with contemporary theological thought. To do this, I depend on a variety of other theologians and philosophers, such as William T. Cavanaugh, Paul W. Kahn, Mary M. Keys, and Stanley Hauerwas, who variably use political theory, theology, critical history, and existential phenomenology to uncover the theological dimensions of political life, especially in the United States.

Once this is accomplished, the dissertation moves on to construct a positive account of Christian political engagement that takes seriously the Christian narrative as well as the demands of the common good. To this end, this dissertation engages in a critical conversation with theologians from both liberationist and postliberal camps, such as Jacques Maritain, Robert W. Jenson, Rowan Williams, Oliver O'Donovan, Kathryn Tanner, Stanley Hauerwas, José Míguez Bonino, and John Milbank. In so doing, this dissertation develops a Christian politics of the common good and points towards a way beyond the simple polarization between thinkers of both camps. The last part of the dissertation will be dedicated to bringing the Christian conception of the common good into conversation with liberal political theorists, such as John Dewey, Joan Tronto, and Martha Nussbaum, in order to show that Christians and political liberals can find common cause in fighting for a society dedicated to the common flourishing of all. Chapters outline is as follows:

#### Part One:

##### 1. The Theological Core of Politics

This chapter examines the theological character of political life. Recent theologians and theorists of the common good, such as David Hollenbach, Mary M. Keys, Stanley Hauerwas, and William T. Cavanaugh have criticized liberal political theories, such as that of Rawls, are unable to account for the condition of possibility for political solidarity.<sup>15</sup> Keys argues that by bracketing questions of the good liberal theorists render political life unintelligible. Similarly, Hollenbach shows that a political society that brackets questions about the good could hardly foster citizen solidarity to sustain the institutions that make democratic life possible.<sup>16</sup>

Cavanaugh and Hauerwas concur with Keys and Hollenbach but take the criticism a step further. For Cavanaugh, the religious neutrality of the liberal state is, in fact, an illusion. Through his study of the origins of the modern nation-state, Cavanaugh shows that the nation-state is an object of devotion that competes with other religious bonds and loyalties. Hauerwas' theological analysis of war compellingly demonstrates that political practice is infused with theological meaning. Kahn completes the argument by showing that hidden beneath the liberal rhetoric of law and reason is the illiberal core of faith, love, and devotion to a particular political community.<sup>17</sup> What Kahn reveals in this political phenomenology, perhaps unbeknownst to him, is that absent a true transcendent common good, the nation risks becoming the most powerful object of love and devotion or the default *summum bonum*.

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<sup>15</sup> By criticizing liberalism, my position converges, of course, with the communitarianism associated with Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Sandel, and others. But due to the communitarians' general failure to engage with theological questions, my criticism of liberalism may also apply to some of them. However, due to the focus of this dissertation, I will not engage them directly.

<sup>16</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–31.

<sup>17</sup> Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 29–56.

Taking a cue from Kahn's phenomenological analysis of liberal citizenship, which shows that liberal societies have not done away with the sacred but merely relocated it, this chapter sets out to think through the political consequences of this relocation. This chapter argues that survival of the state could be the ultimate end of the liberal state absent an idea of the transcendent common good. This parallels Augustine's observation in *the City of God* that the city of man necessarily has self-love and self-preservation as its highest ends. A politics without any notion of a transcendent common good risks becoming trapped in the logic of the will to power.

## 2. The Limits of Radical Democracy

This chapter looks at recent attempts to overcome the limits of liberalism by examining the proposals of two prominent political agonists. Critical of liberalism, William E. Connolly and Romand Coles seek to provide a more satisfying account of democracy that takes into account the necessity of thicker conceptions of the good. Like Kahn, Connolly and Coles are aware of how political and social practices are internally related to theology and metaphysics, even if they do not belong to any organized faith tradition. They have, therefore, engaged the works of Christian theologians in interesting ways.

Connolly is critical of liberalism's alleged secular bias. For Connolly, unless secularism is itself relativized, secularism would be the newly established religion.<sup>18</sup> Connolly believes democracy requires deep democratic solidarity across confessional boundaries and an ethos of generous engagement, but secular liberalism is simply too thin a basis of solidarity to do the job.

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<sup>18</sup> See William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Worst of all, secular liberalism's thinness is part of the reason why citizens of democratic states are seeking solace in religious nationalism and fundamentalism. He, therefore, proposes a process metaphysics and ethos of democratic engagement capable of challenging all religious and political absolutisms. Democracy is best served, Connolly argues, if the democratic citizenry understands their epistemic contingency and the fragility of the world.

In a similar vein, Coles wants to take democracy beyond the institutional boundaries of the liberal state. He suggests that by cultivating communities of democratic practice, spaces of hope and political engagement for the marginalized and the oppressed can be created in a world that is increasingly dominated by centralized institutions.<sup>19</sup> By encouraging democratic citizens to form grassroots networks, Coles aims to rebuild democracy from the ground up so that the totalizing forces of the nation-state and global capitalism can be held at bay. Yet, he is suspicious of religions that make metaphysical claims that seem to challenge his absolute commitment to open dialogue and epistemic generosity.

The alternative visions that these postliberal political thinkers provide are among the most fruitful attempts to reimagine democratic politics. However, this chapter shows that while they have each made immense contributions in the effort to challenge the hegemony of nationalism and identitarian politics, neither has provided a robust enough ethical framework that could nurture democratic politics and liberal values. This chapter argues that Connolly and Coles share a common shortcoming: the democratic practices they promote, attractive as they are, cannot be justified by their ontological and ethical assumptions. Their attempt to maintain an ironic distance toward every meta-narrative render their own underlying political values, such as

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<sup>19</sup> Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 109–84.

dialogical generosity and attentiveness to strangers and the excluded unintelligible. Their ethical frameworks are simply too thin to contest the nationalism they criticize.

Part Two:

### 3. Towards a Theological Theory of the Common Good

This chapter begins to outline an account of politics that responds to chapter one's demand for a transcendent conception of the political good that is more robust than Connolly's and Cole's agonistic politics (chapter two) without abandoning their quest for a democratic politics of generosity and justice. To this end, it draws on the works of Jacques Maritain, Robert W. Jenson, and Rowan Williams, to construct such a theological account of the common good.

Jacques Maritain's argument for a Christian personalist foundation of democracy shows that a conception of the human being that has a transcendent spiritual destiny is paramount in delineating the limitations of politics.<sup>20</sup> Without a limiting principle for politics, for Maritain, politics becomes a totalizing sphere of human activity that dominates every aspect of life. Maritain also makes space for positive political engagement in Christian life. Drawing on Aquinas, Maritain believes every human being has a natural desire to fulfill her twofold nature. Human welfare in this life is part of the human journey toward communion with God. Therefore, Christians are called to build a common life with others without making such activities the ultimate end of life. However, his dualistic account of Christian political life, fails to do justice to the intrinsic worth of political engagement. Maritain's eschatology seems to devalue the material and social dimension of human nature in favor of a vision of a solitary human being enjoying the

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 71–75.



life of contemplation. This chapter argues Maritain's limitations arise from his political theology not being properly trinitarian.

Jenson's trinitarian theology is thus resourced to show how a trinitarian account of the political common good can keep the dialectical tension between politics' penultimacy and politics' intrinsic worth. For Jenson, salvation history is God's movement to incorporate all of history into God's triune life through Jesus Christ. The basic contour of a new theological theory of the common good is as follows: the Christian common good is the anticipated eschatological communion—the kingdom of God—that is both what the church as a communal reality bears witness to and the social reality that the world implicitly hopes for in all of its political strivings. On the other hand, the common good is the totality of conditions that enable human beings to flourish as material and spiritual beings. These conditions are necessarily organized politically into a political community. By resourcing Jenson's theology, this chapter shows that the kingdom of God and the political common good are internally related: the struggle for social justice is constitutive of the task of bearing witness to God's spirit of freedom in history. Furthermore, because the church is a sign of God's eschatological kingdom, politics should be modeled after what Jenson calls “organic democracy” or government by prophecy.<sup>21</sup>

Then, drawing on William's understanding of the relationship between politics and metaphysics, this chapter shows that a trinitarian model of politics supports a dialogical politics of learning that echoes Connolly's and Coles's ethos of generous democratic engagement without giving up on the commitment to truth. The thesis of this chapter is that faith in the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81.

activity of God in history can ground a political hope robust enough to be effective, but humble enough to avoid idolatry.

#### 4. Liberating the Theology of the Common Good

This chapter further develops a Christian conception of the common good by elucidating the relationship between Christians and non-Christians in light of the problems discussed in previous chapters. To accomplish this, this chapter juxtaposes the postliberal ecclesiology of Hauerwas and liberation theologians, such as Joerg Rieger and José Míguez Bonino.

This chapter argues that the church's identity is constituted by its involvement in the world's various struggles for liberation. Rieger and Bonino both show that because the ideological and social conflicts of the world inevitably penetrate the church, the church cannot work out its identity without engaging with them. This is a crucial point which is often missed by the theologians of culture. This neglect is, I believe what gives Milbank and Hauerwas so much bloated confidence in the church's ability to remain the church. The church cannot be itself without activity confronting the social structures that it and its neighbors are a part of. However, because Christians believe that the church and the world share the same eschatological common good, it must hold the world accountable as Christ holds the church accountable. Similarly, Christ also disciplines the church through the voices of those who are outside the church as well, since the Spirit speaks prophetic words through the lips of the oppressed, the marginalized, and their advocates.

The church's task is, therefore, to seek to bring the world ever closer to the shape of the kingdom of God populated by people who see their own flourishing as inextricably bound. By doing so, the church also deals with the same social sins present in itself, without the illusion that

the kingdom will come before the eschaton. The church does so by entering into common struggles for common goods, allowing the struggles to transform the church while it preaches to its partners that their hopes are realized in Jesus Christ. The thesis of this chapter is that it is through political praxis, that the church is able to discover the true meaning of the gospel. So the church needs the world as much as the world needs the church, not because they are interdependent as two external spatial realities, but because they are always already internally related in the same salvation history, as Luke Bretherton aptly argues.<sup>22</sup> As the church finds its eschatological self in the common struggles with the world, the world finds God through the church's attempt to confront the world's theological narratives with its own.

## 5. Liberalism and the Common Good

Having developed a Christian conception of the common good, this chapter turns to the question of how it could be related to the public realm and political liberalism. It sets out to discuss how the Christian conception of the common good might enable Christians to support certain forms of liberalism by bringing the works of John Dewey, Oliver O'Donovan, feminist ethicists of care, and Martha Nussbaum into dialogue.

The idea of the common good faces a number of obstacles today. First, the common good is often associated with tyrannical governments that want to dictate what the good life is for citizens. Second, the liberal overemphasis on tolerance and freedom has created a culture where citizens mainly have a live and let live attitude when it comes to politics.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a contemporary theory of the common good must provide both a robust foundation of political life

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<sup>22</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 61–94.

<sup>23</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 3–31.

that could make sense of political community as an end in itself without doing injustice to the reasonable pluralism that exists within liberal societies.

To this end, this chapter begins with an account of the nature of the public space and the nature of public authority. Dewey's illuminating discussion of the origin of public compellingly demonstrates that the public sphere comes into existence, because of the social consequences of human actions. Therefore, he argues, human beings exist in associations inevitably under the oversight of public authorities. However, Dewey's understanding of the public lacks a normative foundation and his commitment to democratic values seems question-begging. It is for this reason that Oliver O'Donovan's theory of public authority of judgment is resourced to provide a normative framework of political criticism.

O'Donovan's theory of public authority as guardian of justice leads to the question of what justice entails in the public realm. O'Donovan's account of attributive justice, regulated by the normative idea of the equal dignity of every person, provides further determinations for what public justice entails. Dignity, however, as many feminists point out, cannot be separated from human vulnerability and dependency. Therefore, feminists' ethicists of care, such as Joan Tronto and Virginia Held, correctly criticize traditional liberal theorists for neglecting the equally pressing responsibility of public care. However, care as a public responsibility inevitably raises questions about paternalism and authoritarianism in the context of liberal societies. So, it is necessary to turn to the work of Julie Anne White to show that care does not necessarily mean disempowering paternalism.

Feminist ethicists of care are, however, worried about essentialism and universal values, so many of them reject normative anthropology in favor of more hermeneutical approaches to political ethics. This chapter then turns to the work of Martha Nussbaum to show that justice and

care need not be separated. Nussbaum shows that a normative philosophical anthropology is necessary to give shape to political justice. She compellingly argues that lacking certain capacities, a life worthy of human dignity would be undermined. At the same time, these capacities also depend on society for their development and protection. Therefore, members of a society have a responsibility to ensure that everyone reaches the threshold level of a dignified life. Her political doctrines do not depend on any particular religious tradition nor a comprehensive idea of the good. It does, however, provide Christians who reject both individualism and political idolatry with good grounds to endorse liberalism.

Towards the end of this chapter, some Christian doubts about liberalism are dispelled. This section argues that a Christian understanding of the common good shares with liberalism a commitment to basic freedoms, although Christians are committed to them for theological reasons. This constitutes an overlapping consensus. Furthermore, human freedom depends on liberal social institutions. The common good, after all, is the totality of conditions that enables persons to live a dignified life, no matter what their conception of the good is. In conclusion, this chapter shows that a thin conception of the political good for the purpose of politics is not to leave behind theology or the church. Rather this account of the good life can serve as a rule of thumb for Christian political engagement in liberal societies.

## Chapter 1: The Theological Core of Politics

### Introduction

The central contention of this chapter is that absent transcendent ends, the survival of nation-state risks becoming the de facto ultimate end of political life. Transcendent does not necessarily mean the God of Christianity, but it does have to be something that is immune to the contingencies of history—such as the Kantian kingdom of ends.<sup>24</sup> It follows then that liberal politics depends on communities that keep thicker narratives about the good life alive for its own stability.<sup>25</sup> My claim about the necessity of transcendence is, of course, not new. The work of Benedict Anderson on nationalism and William T. Cavanaugh's work on the emergence of the modern state both gesture towards this conclusion. The purpose of this chapter is more modest. It draws out their insights and develops them by bringing them into conversation with Paul W. Kahn's rich phenomenological account of political life.

Recent criticism of liberalism by political theologians and Christian social ethicists have focused on liberal theory's inability to make sense of political solidarity. David Hollenbach, Mary M. Keys, and Stanley Hauerwas provide good examples of this line of criticism. In various ways, these thinkers argue that the primary failure of liberalism as a political program is its inability to foment desirable forms of social solidarity because it lacks an adequate conception of

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<sup>24</sup> The overarching argument of this dissertation is that Christianity does offer such an end and that it contains good resources that can help to strengthen the best aspirations of democratic politics. It is not concerned, therefore, with the question of whether Christianity is better than other religious traditions or philosophies in this regard. A political liberal indeed hopes that the democratic vision can become an overlapping consensus and a Christian have good reasons to believe her moral values can and will be found in other traditions and philosophies as well.

<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that Christianity should become a prop for the state. Christians have reasons internal to their tradition to support liberalism as a political project. This will be elaborated in chapters 4 and 5.

the good that could positively mediate the relationship between increasingly atomized individuals. With the exception of Hauerwas and other post-liberal critics of liberalism like him, such as John Milbank, these theologians and ethicists believe Christianity's most important contribution to politics is that it offers important resources to strengthen the civic bond between citizens in liberal societies. What they do not discuss, as Hauerwas' critique of liberalism shows, is that a viable political community—even a liberal one—depends on what its members take to be ultimately significant.<sup>26</sup> The existential stances of citizens govern the moral shape of the political community and what defensive actions are considered morally licit when it is confronted with existential threats.

What Kahn provides is a compelling description of politics as a site of existential struggles. In other words, it is about perpetuating and defending what is taken to be the highest end. This struggle is not just about different political ethics, but the proper place of the political as a site of human meaning-making. By examining the role of human desire, faith, and loyalty play in politics, Kahn's phenomenology serves as an entry point for a more detailed account of where theology might enter into politics. This sets the stage for a more constructive account of political ethics in the chapters to come. In conclusion, this chapter aims to show that the virtues that are necessary for the flourishing of democratic societies risk becoming undermined and sacrificed if the survival of the nation-state remains the implicit ultimate political end. To accomplish this, this chapter begins with an analysis of contemporary political theologians and ethicists, such as Hollenbach, Keys, Hauerwas, and Cavanaugh. After teasing out their insights and limitations, the theological significance of Kahn's phenomenology will be explored in detail.

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<sup>26</sup> Whether one agrees with Hauerwas' understanding of the relationship between Christianity and political liberalism is irrelevant to insightful points he makes about the nature of politics.

## I. David Hollenbach against Liberal Individualism

In *Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Hollenbach argues that a political society that brackets questions about the good cannot foster enough solidarity among citizens to sustain the institutions that make democratic life possible.<sup>27</sup> Summarizing seminal figures in Western political thought, such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, Hollenbach shows that “service to the common good was central to the normative vision of the good life through much of Western thought.”<sup>28</sup> By the common good, Hollenbach means the political common life through which the good of every individual is realized, not simply particular public goods—such as government, hospitals, and economic institutions—that are necessary for viable social life.

The common good of the political community is, for Hollenbach, the material condition of the good of individuals and should, therefore, be accorded a degree of ethical primacy. The common good also gives shape to the kind of life each individual ought to pursue.<sup>29</sup> That is to say, the common good organizes and sets limits to how individuals in a community pursue his or her own good in relation to others. However, Hollenbach argues, in contemporary liberal societies, the idea of the common good or a common life is clearly threatened. This, he believes, is partly due to an unduly focus on the rights of the individual, which might give the impression that the political community is unimportant or secondary to the good of the individual. Therefore, instead of the common good, contemporary political discourse prefers terms, such as “public interest” or “general welfare.”<sup>30</sup> These terms, for Hollenbach, betray an understanding of

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<sup>27</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 3–31.

<sup>28</sup> Hollenbach, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Hollenbach, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hollenbach, 7; Barry Bozeman, *Public Values and Public Interest: Counterbalancing Economic Individualism* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007). See Bozeman’s work for an account of “public interest.”



society as merely a collection of individuals or the accidental byproduct of the convergence of individual interests.

Hollenbach agrees with John Rawls that the “eclipse” of the idea of the common good coincides with the rise and affirmation of different “visions of the good life.”<sup>31</sup> Liberalism, for both Hollenbach and Rawls, is designed to protect the freedom of individuals to determine the purpose of their lives without arbitrary interference by the state. Liberal toleration and negative liberties thus undermine the ancient idea of the common good, which is regarded with suspicion by liberals because of its perceived authoritarian implications. Under liberalism, Hollenbach argues, “all-encompassing understandings of the common good must be subordinated to the importance of tolerance.”<sup>32</sup> This liberal defense of tolerance is buttressed by a culture that fosters an understanding of the individual as being “self-made” and detached from the social context.<sup>33</sup> Hollenbach believes the convergence of liberal values, such as tolerance, and cultural individualism resulted in the ascendance of tolerance as the absolute value of American public life.<sup>34</sup>

While Hollenbach agrees that Rawls’ liberal fear of tyranny has some basis and that it is unimaginable to return to a classical understanding of the common good in a pluralistic context, he believes something important is lost when a political society values tolerance to the exclusion of the common good. He argues that while there might be good reasons for modern societies to be wary of the possibility of a state capable of imposing a particular vision of the good life on its citizens, this weariness should not determine the entire agenda of politics. Hollenbach believes

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<sup>31</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Hollenbach, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Hollenbach, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Hollenbach, 28–31.

the current historical context has so shifted that many problems other than the problem of tyranny have emerged that require some reconfiguration of our political imagination. “Avoidance of conflict is crucial, to be sure,” he writes, “but there are major social and political questions today that call for more vision than tolerance can generate on its own.”<sup>35</sup> Among the emerging problems modern liberal societies face are the growing gap of economic inequality, poverty, and the negative side of globalization. In the face of these complex social problems, the ultimate values of toleration can only lead to “acquiescence.”<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, what the culture of individualism and liberal toleration cannot account for are its own material and social conditions. Hollenbach insightfully shows that tolerance and individual rights are, in the end, social goods. They emerged within a historical context of communities struggling with religious and political differences. They are designed to help societies avoid tyranny and grave violations of human dignity.<sup>37</sup> So toleration and individual rights exist to promote a well-ordered society, where individuals are not arbitrarily excluded from the goods and benefits produced by the society as a whole.

On the other hand, in order for the values of toleration and individual freedom to flourish, social institutions have to be in place to protect individual rights and provide spaces of political participation, where common habits of toleration and respect can be developed. In addition, a tolerant society also presupposes a political structure that can put a check on political power so that tyranny might be avoided.<sup>38</sup> So, for Hollenbach, even toleration and individual freedom are, properly speaking, common goods that require the cooperation of the entire political community.

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<sup>35</sup> Hollenbach, 34.

<sup>36</sup> Hollenbach, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Hollenbach, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Hollenbach, 70–72.

Social institutions, he argues, “generate and sustain the sense of being an agent in society, of having the power to make a difference by speaking and acting in a life shared with others.”<sup>39</sup>

Hollenbach thinks the only way forward, given the increasing degree of social interdependence of modern societies, is to develop a new way of thinking about the common good. What is most important for Hollenbach is not simply the recovery of a social ethos that acknowledges the flourishing of one depends on the flourishing of all. Rather, what is most crucial is that Americans develop a social imagination that views the political community not merely as an instrumental means to the good of the individual, but as an end in itself. “[T]he common good of public life,” he writes, “is a realization of the human capacity for intrinsically valuable relationships, not only a fulfillment of the needs and deficiencies of individuals.”<sup>40</sup> This reimagining of the meaning of political community, for Hollenbach, is the key to strengthen social solidarity at a time of rampant individualism.

Hollenbach’s insightful criticism of liberal individualism is quite warranted. This is a topic to which the last chapter of this dissertation will return. As a theologian, Hollenbach thinks religious communities have an important role to play to bring his vision into reality. Before defending his position, he first acknowledges the social pitfalls of religion. Hollenbach concedes that secular critics of religion do argue, with some warrant, that religion can be prone to solidify and reinforce social divisions that threaten the unity of the nation-state. So, religion seems to be a *prima facie* enemy to the project that Hollenbach wants to undertake. To address this concern, Hollenbach cites many examples of historic Christian activism—such as that of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Sojourners community—that strengthened the American democratic tradition.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hollenbach, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Hollenbach, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Hollenbach, 93–96.

So, for Hollenbach, the real question is not *whether* religion should be a public force in promoting the common good, but *what kind* of religion should be public. He is convinced that in a country where social ties are severed as political associational life in civil society declines, religious communities can and should revitalize political participation by cultivating civic virtues and solidarity.<sup>42</sup>

For Hollenbach, the great enemy of the religious renewal of the common good is what he calls the “integralist” or “theocratic” approach to public religiosity.<sup>43</sup> By integralism, he means a totalizing a model of politics that promotes the subordination of social life to the authority of revelation as defined by the institutional church. Hollenbach thinks this approach “confuses the unity of the cosmos in God with the subordination of all life to the church.”<sup>44</sup> He does not believe religious communities should advocate the political establishment of a religion. Thus, he applauds the American separation of church and state. To support his position, Hollenbach draws on Augustine’s *City of God*, among other Catholic social theorists, arguing that, for Augustine and the Catholic tradition, the perfect society ordered to God cannot be achieved in history; therefore, Christians should work for the penultimate common good instead of trying to build a Christian society through political means.<sup>45</sup> At best, Hollenbach argues that earthly political communities can only resemble the heavenly city by its citizens’ bond of love and solidarity.

Hollenbach is correct to see Christianity’s contribution to politics as limiting the scope of religious politics in its anti-integralism, retraining the power of the state, and promoting civic solidarity.<sup>46</sup> Hollenbach acknowledges Christianity’s historical role in stripping the state of

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<sup>42</sup> Hollenbach, 102–3.

<sup>43</sup> Hollenbach, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Hollenbach, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Hollenbach, 125–26.

<sup>46</sup> Hollenbach, 132.

religious pretensions, but he does not pursue this line of thinking. What Hollenbach does not discuss at any length is how the liberal conception of a (relatively) autonomous political space and the confidence that citizens who do not share the same comprehensive doctrines can still form civic friendships might still rely on certain theological narratives. This is an understandable omission given that his primary theological target is the theological integralists who promote a realized political eschatology. Hollenbach's public Christianity, therefore, gives impetus to Christian political activism and delimit the boundaries of politics, which creates a flourishing civil society outside of state control.

However, Hollenbach does not discuss the necessarily theological dimension of politics. A common bond of friendship between citizens cannot be sustained apart from thicker narratives that serve as the ground of that bond. In other words, his rejection of integralism has gone too far in the other direction: he no longer sees that questions of ultimate ends cannot be indefinitely deferred, even for secular politics. What liberalism rightly asks citizens to see other persons as having inviolable value, for political purposes, even if it means suspending their drive to dominate and control one another, even under exigent circumstances. It also asks citizens to restrain their apocalyptic drive to realize a final collective identity—one based on homogenous religion, language, or culture. Liberalism expects these notable challenging things virtues. To see politics as being limited in this way requires higher values. Here, Hollenbach misses an opportunity to show how liberalism itself needs communities formed by comprehensive doctrines.

## II. Mary M. Keys on the Limits of Liberal Community

Though a political theorist by training, Mary Keys is more sensitive than Hollenbach to how the Christian tradition informs Christian political engagement and liberal politics. In *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, Keys points out, by bracketing such questions of the good, liberal theorists, such as John Rawls and William Galston, cannot provide an adequate normative foundation for political life. Like Hollenbach, Keys believes one of the core problems of contemporary liberalism is that it lacks a thick enough conception of the good to sustain the virtues necessary for democratic life. For Keys, however, even communitarian thinkers like Michael Sandel—insightful as he is about the social nature of human identity—fail to provide an alternative to Rawls’ liberalism, because of Sandel’s reluctance to ask metaphysical questions.

Keys begins her criticism of Rawls by showing that Rawls does, in fact, have a theory of the common good. Drawing on Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, Keys points out that that for Rawls, “a narrowly individualistic view of human nature ... fails to do justice to the deep meaning of the ‘social nature of mankind.’”<sup>47</sup> According to Keys, Rawls believes that in ‘well-ordered’ society, founded on his two principles of justice, individuals would have the maximal ability to pursue their own goods and potentials. This condition of individual flourishing in a good liberal society would then spill over into social and political life were individuals delight in their common flourishing in society. For Rawls, Keys comments, citizens in a well-ordered society would come to appreciate that the “attainment of everyone’s good is facilitated by the circumstances of justice,” which is itself a product of liberal social institutions that make their common flourishing

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<sup>47</sup> Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, 33.

possible.<sup>48</sup> So for Rawls, citizens of a liberal society would eventually come to affirm their common flourishing and the liberal institutions that make it possible as goods in themselves.

Keys, however, finds Rawls' theory of the common good inadequate. She identifies the problem in Rawls' "instrumental" conception of practical rationality.<sup>49</sup> Individuals, in Rawls' scheme, do not have any objective moral guidance as to what their 'proper' ends ought to be.<sup>50</sup> A good is simply what a person happens to desire. Within this Rawlsian framework, Keys argues, individuals have no real normative reason to want to value activities that contribute to society or even to enlarge their conceptions of the good so as to include the well-ordered society as a good in itself.

Keys agrees that individuals may develop a more social understanding of the good as Rawls had hoped, but the problem is that they do not have any normative reason to develop such an understanding. As far as the well-ordered society is concerned, the irony is that there is no moral distinction between a person who, in pursuing his or her own ends, pursue the common good and a person who simply pursues goods that have no intrinsic relation to the good of society. In addition, since Rawls deems it inappropriate for public institutions to have any role in promoting social virtues or dialogue about proper goods, Keys does not believe Rawls' theory of the common good will finally work.

Neither does Keys think Sandel or Galston have offered sufficient alternatives to Rawls' liberalism. She is appreciative of Sandel's criticisms of Rawls' liberal anthropology. With Sandel, Keys affirm that the identity of the political subject cannot be separated from the community within which it is situated. This means that the values of individuals are socially

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<sup>48</sup> Keys, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Keys, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Keys, 38.

constituted.<sup>51</sup> For Sandel, then, the common good of society, to a certain extent, transcends the good of individuals. Yet, Sandel does not provide a trans-communal account of the common good. So, members of a community are still left with no objective criteria to determine the relative goodness of different communities.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, members of a community risk becoming trapped in the values of the group to which they belong. In other words, while Sandel correctly identifies key shortcomings in Rawls' philosophy, he did not provide a robust alternative to fill the void Rawls' left behind.<sup>53</sup>

Galston's theory of pluralism, on the other hand, is dependent on a metaphysical account of the diversity of ends that explicitly denies the possibility of a common good. For Galston, Keys elaborates, society exists to serve the only recognizable universal good: survival. From the good of survival, Galston derives the basic moral rules of society. By doing so, Galston makes survival the implicit ultimate good that supersedes all other goods. However, Keys points out that the good of survival and the moral codes derived from it are no less arbitrary in a world of genuine value pluralism. At the end of the day, Keys argues, Galston's version of liberalism is unable even to provide a consistent or workable set of moral rules.

So far, Keys criticizes political liberalism on two fronts. Liberalism either renders social solidarity unintelligible (Rawls) or else cannot prevent the valorization of the political community itself (Sandel and Galston). One could, of course, take issue with Keys' characterization of liberalism. One way of doing this would be to say that Rawls' goal is not to

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<sup>51</sup> Keys, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Keys, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Keys criticism can perhaps be applied to all account of justice that grounds itself on communal norms without any appeal to trans-historical moral values, such as that of Michael Walzer. See Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).



provide a final account of the good that could convince everyone in a liberal society that society matters. Liberals rightly acknowledge that no such account is possible, given the fact of pluralism. Rather, Rawls is merely showing that given the social arrangement of liberalism, it is likely that people who are very different from one another will come to appreciate each other's company under a liberal political system. In other words, Rawls is defending liberalism precisely as a viable overlapping consensus. So, it might be quite appropriate for Rawls to leave the task of providing a more adequate account of the good to different religious or philosophical communities themselves.

With that said, however, both moral incoherence at the level of social ethics and the valorization of the political community are important problems that people existing in liberal societies must confront as this chapter will show. It is better to say that these are problems liberal theory as a theory is not meant to solve or should solve. So, Keys quite rightly goes to deeper Christians sources in order to make sense of political life for Christians. She proposes to reclaim the metaphysically "thicker" political theory of Thomas Aquinas as a better alternative to the thinner account of liberalism.

For Keys, Aquinas' contribution is threefold. First, Aquinas provides a metaphysical anthropology that makes sense of persons as essentially social and political.<sup>54</sup> This enables a Thomist political theorist to justify the political community and the relationships it entails as a common good that transcends the good of individuals. Second, the same metaphysical anthropology also provides a normative account of the good community, such that every political community can be judged on its basis.<sup>55</sup> Third, by grounding his metaphysical anthropology in a

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<sup>54</sup> Keys, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Keys, 95.

transcendent God, Aquinas' anthropology also enables members of the political community to have a loyalty and devotion that transcend their ties to particular political communities.<sup>56</sup> This, Keys argues, helps one to see ethical virtues as being directed to the universal human community, and not just particular nation-states. Here, Keys correctly identifies some places where a theological account of the common good might be helpful.

Like Hollenbach, Keys sees Christian tradition as providing support for Christians to be engaged in the work of social justice in the public sphere. The Christian tradition at its best, in her view, should also strengthen the solidarity between citizens in society. Keys goes beyond Hollenbach, however, by suggesting that the Christian tradition—through Thomist lenses—not only has important contributions to make to a liberal public sphere that is struggling to fulfill its own aspirations but that the theoretical presupposition of liberal society itself is incomplete without a robust Christian metaphysical anthropology.

In addition, Keys also shows that Christianity must challenge forms of liberalism that are developed in individualistic directions and close in on itself as an incoherent comprehensive doctrine, such as that of Galston's. For Keys, the Christian tradition is capable of elevating and transforming the character of politics.<sup>57</sup> For instance, more so than Sandel's communitarian framework, Key's Thomistic account of political life promotes a form of "human fellowship that transcends particular political societies and their borders."<sup>58</sup> It also shows that human beings are bound by a tie of charity that beckons citizens to develop the virtue of humility when engaging with each other in public discourse.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Keys, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Keys, 165.

<sup>58</sup> Keys, 193.

<sup>59</sup> Keys, 158–59.

Keys is, therefore, far more attentive to the theological dimensions of politics than Hollenbach, who tends to see politics as almost a quasi-autonomous realm where theological questions can be bracketed. Like Hollenbach, Keys is also aware to the fact that while liberalism claims to bracket questions of the good, the good tends to resurface in other ways. For instance, she was able to show that even what is lacking in Rawls, Sandel, and Galston, is precisely a conception of the good robust enough to make sense of political community as a good in itself. More importantly, she recognizes that even liberal societies cannot do away with questions about the good. The good of survival in Galston is a good example of the need for such discussions. By identifying the necessarily teleological structure of political life, Keys reveals the theological nature of politics and how stances regarding what is ultimately important—such as survival or communal unity—shapes political life. Just so, her framework can potentially push against the immanentist drive of political activity that can forget its penultimate place in human life.<sup>60</sup>

The primary target of Keys' criticism is the nihilistic direction liberalism can be taken if its defenders, such as Galston, simply take the fact of pluralism as such as the starting point of their moral theory. The Rawls of political liberalism is, perhaps, less vulnerable to this criticism, because he committed himself to offer a free-standing theory of liberalism that is not grounded in any particular vision of ultimate ends. As Keys points out, the fact of pluralism can yield no fundamental political values in itself. This is why it is so easy to sneak in undefended political

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<sup>60</sup> There are ambiguities in Key's criticism of liberalism, however. Her concern is that untethered to thicker moral frameworks, liberalism tends towards nihilism. This is certainly true. Since Rawls' *Political Liberalism* many political liberals backed away from thick metaphysical doctrines and are instead content to provide a free-standing political doctrine that is freed from explicit moral foundations, though not without explicit moral values—such as fairness and human dignity—that can serve as a political overlapping consensus. So, liberals can simply respond that Keys is free to provide a better justification of liberalism or even to defend a better contending version of liberalism and tether it to her own comprehensive doctrine. But the thinness of liberal theory is like this by design.

values, such as survival, through the back door. What Keys does not discuss is why survival should become the default political value, absent a moral political end that could hold the instincts for survival and domination in check. In fact, there is a connection between the absence of a transcendent end in these frameworks and the elevation of survival as the highest political value.

### III. Stanley Hauerwas' on Liberalism's Fear of Death

Hauerwas agrees with Hollenbach and Keys in terms of liberalism's inability to make sense of the good of community on individualistic terms. In his famous essay, "America's God," Hauerwas observes that a central dogma of American liberalism is that "you should have no story except the story you chose when you have no story."<sup>61</sup> That is to say, Americans share nothing in common except the conviction that there is nothing that they *should* share in common. This description of liberalism looks very much like Keys' reading of Galston. It follows that each American should have the absolute freedom to determine the meaning of life for oneself. The American people, therefore, is not already a "storied people."<sup>62</sup> According to Hauerwas, the freedom of political liberalism is grounded in the presumption that the subject always exists independently of its relationship to the other. But if this is the case, what explains the solidarity of the American people as a people? Negative freedom is surely a thin basis for solidarity. Here, Hauerwas' critique of liberalism parallels that of Hollenbach's and Keys'.

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<sup>61</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 18.

<sup>62</sup> The people of Israel, by contrast, were claimed by God as his people of the covenant, whether the individual liked it or not.

At the same time, however, Hauerwas also moves towards a more interesting criticism of liberalism. For instance, later on, he argues that the only thing that can bind such people together, Hauerwas adds, is the common “presumption that death is to be avoided at all costs.”<sup>63</sup> By mentioning death, Hauerwas’ analysis transcends the standard communitarian criticism of liberalism.<sup>64</sup> At first glance, Hauerwas’ observation seems implausible: if the *telos* of liberalism is the freedom of the individual to determine the meaning of life and if such a community cannot help but make the avoidance of death its primary political good, then why are so many people willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the liberal nation-state? It would seem that liberal politics is not about the fear of death. It is possible to read Hauerwas this way. The essay itself seems to argue that American politics is about nothing more than the avoidance of death “at all costs.”<sup>65</sup>

It seems more fruitful, however, to read the essay within the context of Hauerwas’ other statements on liberalism and war. A closer reading suggests that we should not understand “the fear of death” as merely the fear of physical death. After all, Hauerwas acknowledges that the sacrifices demanded by war are constitutive of the American liberal imagination.<sup>66</sup> Drawing from Chris Hedges and Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, Hauerwas argues that war on behalf of the

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<sup>63</sup> Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, 18.

<sup>64</sup> Here I am thinking of philosophers like Sandal and Alasdair MacIntyre, whose primary quarrel with liberalism, like the theologians discussed here, is that it lacks an adequate conception of the common good. See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). According to the communitarians, the problem of liberalism—as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and most recently John Rawls—is twofold. First, liberalism is grounded in a truncated picture of the human subject that is devoid of religious and communal ties. Second, liberalism’s thin conception of the good lacks the adequate resources to prevent political deliberation from degenerating into a nihilistic contest between interest groups.

<sup>65</sup> Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Hauerwas, 57–61.

modern nation-state exhibits a sacred quality. War, Hauerwas points out, is able to bind a people together and give them a meaning in life that transcends the mundane. The sacrifices of war, for Hauerwas, seems to connect the citizen to something transcendent and sacred, something that promises the existential immortality. The fear of death, then, should be interpreted to mean the fear that life might lack meaning. The fear of death, in other words, is not the fear of physical death, but the fear of spiritual death. It is existential anxiety as the next section will show.

Hauerwas is here signaling that politics, even in a liberal order, is intrinsically religious in some sense. He does not elaborate on how this might so. But he does offer some interesting clues. For instance, Hauerwas clearly points out that the story that we get to choose our stories is itself a contending existential narrative about what is of ultimate value to the political community.<sup>67</sup> This stands in some tension with his earlier statement that Americans do not share a common good. Strictly speaking, America, as a liberal society, does not lack a conception of the good as Hauerwas initially imagined. Rather, liberal freedom, by Hauerwas' own admission, is a contending political good among others. The problem is, then, not simply that liberal societies lack an adequate account of the common good, but that this good is purely imminent. Purely imminent goods cannot be severed from the community that instantiates them. Therefore, one cannot be committed to American liberalism without also being committed to the survival of America as a nation-state. The nation-state can then become the ultimate good in itself absent goods that transcend it.

In order for Americans to preserve the ultimate meaning of their lives—that is, freedom—they must ensure the survival of the liberal state, which embodies and preserves these values. The project of the liberal state, severed from transcendence goods, is thus a human

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<sup>67</sup> Hauerwas, 18.

attempt to collectively achieve immortality. Since the liberal conception of freedom is detached from that which is truly transcendent, perpetuating the existence of the liberal state becomes the ultimate end of politics. This is why the liberal state exhibits a sacred quality. But one question remains: why is it that every political order that attempts to detach itself from the sacred merely reproduces it in other forms? William T. Cavanaugh provides some helpful insights.

#### IV. Nature of the Nation-State according to William T. Cavanaugh

Cavanaugh concurs with both Keys and Hollenbach that liberalism lacks an adequate conception of the good in order to foster deep social bonds. He argues that the liberal state is grounded in a “theological anthropology that precludes any truly social process.”<sup>68</sup> Liberalism precludes truly social processes because liberalism’s individualistic conception of the human being ensures that citizens are primarily related to one another, formally, through the mediation of the state. Liberalism encourages citizens to view themselves as rights bearers who are only incidentally related to one another through a mutually beneficial contract.<sup>69</sup> The social instantiation of this individualistic anthropology is what Cavanaugh calls a “unitary space,” space where different social bodies, such as the church, is absorbed into the state as its client.<sup>70</sup> Citizens are thus robbed of the intermediary institutions and social bodies that could foster deep political and social ties beyond the totalizing influences of the state. As a result, citizens in liberal societies stand in solidarity with one another only through the mediation of the impersonal nation-state.

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<sup>68</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 44.

<sup>69</sup> Cavanaugh, 45.

<sup>70</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 20.

Here Cavanaugh's criticism of liberalism converges with that of Hollenbach's and Keys'. But like Hauerwas, Cavanaugh takes the criticism a step further. For him, the religious neutrality of the nation-state is, in fact, an illusion. Through his careful historical study of the origins of the modern nation-state, Cavanaugh shows that the nation-state has been an object of devotion that competes with other religious bonds and loyalties.<sup>71</sup> In the absence of a thick conception of the good, Cavanaugh believes political liberalism's commitment to individual rights seems too weak a basis to unite citizens in a common bond of solidarity.<sup>72</sup> In addition, liberalism's commitment to an individualist anthropology seems only to undermine solidarity. Cavanaugh concludes that in order to sustain a liberal polity, the nation-state must inevitably fill in the space previously occupied by common conceptions of the good and become the common good itself. "But what could be the source of unity in a nation-state of diverse ends without a transcendent reference to participation in any single god?" he asks. He concludes that "it must be that the nation-state becomes an end in itself, a kind of transcendent reference needed to bind the many to each other."<sup>73</sup>

Cavanaugh rightly points out that in the absence of transcendent ends, the nation-state fills in the void as an end in itself. He also agrees, with Augustine, that if the love of temporal goods is not referred to an infinite good, the same love becomes *libido dominandi* or the lust for power.<sup>74</sup> However, it is not entirely accurate to say that the liberal state does not promote a shared moral end. As Hollenbach and Keys point out, liberal toleration and human rights are themselves social ends that require the protection of social and political institutions. The shape of

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<sup>71</sup> Cavanaugh, 7–45.

<sup>72</sup> Cavanaugh, 40.

<sup>73</sup> Cavanaugh, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Cavanaugh, 58.



political life that certain versions of secular liberalism promote may undermine social solidarity and moral seriousness, but it is surely concrete enough to be a coherent social program. So, what makes nation-states ends in themselves is not simply the lack of a common conception of the good life. Something else is at stake.

Cavanaugh's account, therefore, does not explain why or how the nation-state becomes the ultimate political end absent a transcendent referent. In order to fill in this gap, it is necessary to turn to the work of Kahn. Kahn completes the account of the theological core of politics by showing that hidden beneath the liberal rhetoric of law and reason is the illiberal core of faith, love, and commitment organized by a theological narrative undergirding the social order.<sup>75</sup> What Kahn reveals in this political phenomenology, is not that absent a shared end, the nation becomes the most powerful object of love and devotion.

#### V. The Persistence of the Sacred: Paul W. Kahn's Political Phenomenology

Every political community contains a moral end that determines the shape of life that is to be honored and preserved. The issue is, rather, that such political ends and the community that embodies them are inextricably bound. If a particular way of life is inseparable from the community that instantiates it, then the survival of the polity must ethically precede the shape of life that the polity honors. Commitment to a political ethics, liberal or not, must, therefore, take a backseat to survival. This is why the "existence" of the polity precedes, as Kahn points out, its "essence."<sup>76</sup> If this is the case, then the default political *summum bonum* is survival.

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<sup>75</sup> Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, 29–56.

<sup>76</sup> Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 60–61.

In his provocative book *Sacred Violence*, Kahn argues that what is revolutionary about the modern Western political imaginary is the relocation of the sacred from the monarch to citizens as a collective subject. Sacralizing the political community, however, only accentuates the collective need of self-preservation, because the political community itself is conceived of as the ultimate end of political life. For Kahn, this is most clearly shown by liberal regimes' willingness to suspend law and ethics for the sake of national and economic security. He argues that the resurgence of public debates about the role of torture plays in national security reveals the presence of an often-ignored dimension of politics: the dimension of the sacred.<sup>77</sup> The neglect to investigate the sacred dimension of politics prevents liberal theorists from truly grasping the place of sacrifice and violence in holding a political community together. The practice of torture and military sacrifice demonstrate that underneath the rhetoric of law and reason lies the specter of sovereign power or the power to demand allegiance, faith, and sacrifice.

The identification of the sacred with the popular sovereign is why the language of sacrifice, love, and loyalty still permeates secular democratic politics. A CNN exchange between legal scholar Alan Dershowitz and Ken Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, after 9/11 helps to illuminate this point. On the show, Dershowitz advocated for torture to be strictly regulated instead of outlawed for the sake of national security.<sup>78</sup> Roth, on the other hand, believes torture should be prohibited regardless of the circumstances. For him, no pragmatic reason could justify the use of torture, which violates a fundamental human right. In response,

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<sup>77</sup> Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>78</sup> He urges that government agents apply for "torture warrants," which would allow them to do what is necessary under supervision. "Dershowitz: Torture Could Be Justified," CNN International, March 4, 2003, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/LAW/03/03/cnna.Dershowitz/>.

however, Dershowitz points out that “It is much better to have rules that we can live within ... And [that] absolute prohibitions, generally, are not the kind of rules that countries can live within.”<sup>79</sup> At the end of the interview, Blitzer asked Roth the key question: “Could [you] morally justify letting this terrorist that you've captured remain silent and allow hundreds of people to die?”<sup>80</sup>

Blitzer’s hypothetical situation is yet another iteration of the “ticking time bomb scenario.” It is often used to show that anyone could be a consequentialist if the situation is sufficiently grave. However, Kahn would point out that behind this is a more fundamental question: why do *these* lives matter in the first place? This scenario has moral weight because there are people who matter to us in such a way that we are willing to suspend ethics to protect them. Similarly, before there are democratic ideals there is the question of who are “we the people.” As Paul W. Kahn insightfully points out, the existence of a “we,” who deserve our moral concern, precedes the essence or the character of a people.<sup>81</sup>

What Roth failed to grasp is that for people like Dershowitz ideals are meaningless without a people that could embody them. It is this dialectic between existence and essence that makes possible the teleological suspension of the ethical for the higher end of political survival in liberal societies in exceptional situations. For Kahn, the ritualization of sacrifice in warfare is what perpetuates the popular sovereign’s legitimacy. In warfare, citizens are asked to give up their bodies in order to defend the community they love from existential threats. The specter of

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<sup>79</sup> “Dershowitz: Torture Could Be Justified.”

<sup>80</sup> “Dershowitz: Torture Could Be Justified.”

<sup>81</sup> Kahn, *Political Theology*, 60.

war, therefore, has always haunted the liberal order, because war is a modern version of ritual sacrifice.<sup>82</sup>

Kahn is sensitive to the theological dimension of liberal citizenship and thus the limits of liberal political theory. Liberal theory does not, in fact, provide a complete account of the political life. Liberal would, of course, argue that this is liberalism's strength. But Kahn would point out that a more complete account of political life is necessary for political theorists to understand the place and limits of liberalism as well as the existential conditions of political life. In *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, Kahn outlines a common feature of various forms of liberalism. He writes:

[Contemporary] liberal theorists believe in the primacy of autonomous individuals who share a capacity for rational deliberation but do not necessarily share a common set of interests. For most liberal theorists, the autonomous individual always has the capacity to redefine the relationship to his or her culture ... [they believe that] [u]nless individuals can take up the perspective of reason which means to temporarily bracket one's own immediate interests as a source of direction for the will, there will be only ... chaos.<sup>83</sup>

Liberalism, for Kahn, sets the boundary of the political by carving out a space for reason in the public sphere, where personal interests and parochial loyalties are suspended for the sake of reaching a common ground. He argues that two different forms of liberalism have historically been in tension with one another: the "liberalism of faith" and the "liberalism of speech."<sup>84</sup>

The priority of the liberalism of faith is the protection of the private sphere—whether it is religion, property, or family. This liberalism emphasizes the limits of governmental power. The liberalism of speech, on the other hand, sees liberalism as an end in itself. It is suspicious of the

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<sup>82</sup> See Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> Paul W. Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>84</sup> Kahn, 113.

private sphere—such as the sphere of religion and economics—which it deems chaotic and irrational. The liberalism of speech, therefore, legitimizes government by appealing to a rational conception of justice, thereby limiting the power of the private sphere. Secular liberalism moves in the latter direction by normatively conceiving religion as devoid of public significance.

Kahn points out that the liberalism of faith has not been successful at resisting the consolidation of political power in the state, because what is considered private and worthy of governmental protection is often itself a political decision.<sup>85</sup> For instance, if religion is considered a private affair deserving of state protection, the state itself must define what is or is not a religion.<sup>86</sup> The state, therefore, cannot help but be involved in delimiting the place where the public realm ends and where the private realm begins. If the private property or the family is worthy of governmental protection, then the state must define what would count as legitimate property or family.<sup>87</sup> On the liberalism of faith, there is no neutral space where such definitions can be found. So, the private realm seeps into the public realm unavoidably. Private communities must, in the end, provide the definition of precisely what should be publicly protected. The state would then end up upholding some conception of what counts as properly private and exclude other conceptions. Ironically, the state ends up having the final say of what counts as private. The border of the private and public, Kahn argues, can never be absolute, because the public and the private are mutually implicating.<sup>88</sup> Kahn believes this instability is built into the foundation

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<sup>85</sup> Kahn, 113.

<sup>86</sup> Winnifred Fallers Sullivan shows the impossibility of finding a theologically neutral definition of religion by examining numerous court cases about religious freedom. See Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>87</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Kahn, 125.

of the liberalism and what made it possible for American politics to move in the direction of the Enlightenment understanding of the primacy of reason.

The Enlightenment understanding of “pure reason,” therefore, provided a new resource to negotiate the boundary between the private and the public. Kahn claims that the “ambition of the liberal political philosopher is to find that set of arguments that is so compelling that every individual, not corrupted by the illogic of [private] interest, would necessarily affirm those reasons as his own.”<sup>89</sup> As mentioned before, if the public realm is conceived of as a space where irrational commitments and parochial interests are suspended for the sake of rational discourse, then it alone would be competent to determine the proper limit of government.

This marginalization of religion and other “private” aspects of social life from the public realm coincides with the movement from the liberalism of faith to the liberalism of speech. For instance, Rawls’ thesis that the state should refrain from interfering with the chosen ends of individuals so long as they do not undermine the basic requirements of justice is not merely one instance of a “rational” delineation of the private from the public. Rather, the (early) Rawlsian project is nothing short of the affirmation of the political primacy of reason. According to this view, as far as political matters are concerned, churches represent parochial interests and irrational commitments.<sup>90</sup>

Today, reason seems to be what binds a liberal society together. But while the primacy of reason appears to have solved the problem of the boundary between the public and the private, it also created further difficulties. For one, liberals disagree on the precise limits of reason. Once the primacy of reason is affirmed, Kahn argues, there is no way to limit its reach. He writes,

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<sup>89</sup> Kahn, 120.

<sup>90</sup> Kahn, 120.

“Every conception of liberalism, however, is vulnerable to the argument that reason can go still further, that is, that it has conceded too broad a domain to the private.”<sup>91</sup> For Kahn, the emergence of critical theories that deconstruct the dichotomies set up by modernity indicates that once reason is unleashed, there is no telling what it might deconstruct. What Rawls considers to be fairly defensible notions of “public reason” are constantly under attack by theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and William E. Connolly. Every seemingly autonomous choice of a subject—whether it be in regard to religion, family, or her body—can be called into question by reason, if an argument can be made about the choice’s socially constituted nature. For instance, even Rawls’ understanding of “public reason” can be called into question for being a product of a privileged political class and/or implicit supra-rational metaphysical assumptions.

So, for Kahn, even after Western political imagination moved from the liberalism of faith to the liberalism of speech, there remains something beyond reason. Something that holds the political community together that is beyond reason’s ability to grasp. Varieties of liberalism at least indicate that how one determines where the private sphere begins depends on assumptions that are not determined by reason itself. Any act of the individual subject in the private sphere can be argued to have a public significance. The free market, for instance, could be considered a private realm that should be protected from the incursion of public authority. Yet, economists have long pointed out, what constitutes the free market is itself a political decision.<sup>92</sup> For instance, citizens will always have to figure out whether children should be free to contract with employers in exchange for their labor and whether human lives should be traded in the marketplace.

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<sup>91</sup> Kahn, 123.

<sup>92</sup> Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don’t Tell You about Capitalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 1–10.

Kahn is, therefore, right to point out that reason—if abstracted from the particularities of a political tradition—cannot determine the boundaries of the public and private realms: “In all of these [political disputes], the appeal to the “private” is only convincing insofar as it appears as an answer to the question of what is reasonable? That, however, is never a matter of reason alone; it depends on a context of values and expectations.”<sup>93</sup> Reason simply cannot explain why a given liberal society takes this or that form or even why the “private sphere” deserves political protection. It certainly cannot explain why the private continues to resist the reach of reason, despite the instabilities of the boundary between the private and the public. Neither can it explain why citizens are so often willing to sacrifice their lives in order to defend it.

While American citizens may not be willing to die for public reason, they are certainly willing to die in order to protect a political order that defends religion, family, and property. The reason that citizens will not sacrifice themselves for the sake of “public reason” is that it is a realm devoid of ends. “without turning to private ends, the discourse of public reason is empty.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, for Kahn, a political community can only be a political community if it is oriented to a common end or good. Reason, for Kahn, is simply empty without a telos. This is why whatever public reason designates as private—whether it be religion, the family, or the market (the realm of irrationality)—ends up being the public good that reason serves. Kahn points out that this is why Americans celebrate public figures who are financially successful, pious or appear to embody family values.<sup>95</sup>

Liberal theory cannot make sense of these aspects of the political community, because liberalism only concerns itself with “public” reason and “private” desires. What it is unable to

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<sup>93</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 125.

<sup>94</sup> Kahn, 138.

<sup>95</sup> Kahn, 137–38.



account for is the cultural narrative that undergirds the political order itself: a framework that would show why the political community is the way it and why people are willing to die for it. He writes, “liberal values do not ... explain the conditions that bind a community into one sustained historical project. They do not explain why citizens will put the survival of a particular political community ahead of their own survival.”<sup>96</sup> For Kahn, in order to understand politics, philosophers must move beyond the order of reason and desire into the order of love. In other words, the realm of ultimate ends. This is also the same place where theological discourse operates.<sup>97</sup>

Therefore, Kahn is critical of the standard Enlightenment narrative of the march of history from irrational religion to reason.<sup>98</sup> Like Cavanaugh, for Kahn modernity is not the progressive movement from religion to reason, but the consolidation of popular faith and loyalty in the liberal state itself. Kahn believes that to look for “reason” behind national solidarity in political theory is to make a category mistake. It is as silly as attempting to explain “passion for a sport by looking at its rules, or religious faith by looking at doctrine.”<sup>99</sup> Kahn believes something more fundamental is at play in Western politics. What is missing from the liberal account of politics is, rather, an adequate account of the will. Kahn observes that “for the [faculty of the]

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<sup>96</sup> Kahn, 10. William T. Cavanaugh gives a more thorough account of this perspective of Western history. See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> This does not necessarily contradict Talal Asad’s suggestion that applying the category “theology” to secular nationalism is anachronistic. What I am suggesting here is that secular nationalism is also, as a theological narrative, a story about the self, the world, and proper objects of political devotion. Talal Asad uses “ideological construct” to describe what I am referring to. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 194.

<sup>98</sup> Cavanaugh thoroughly criticizes one instantiation of this Enlightenment narrative: the myth of the secular state as the solution to religious violence. See Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

<sup>99</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 262.

will, the body is a point of revelation of a meaning that simultaneously defines the self and is greater than the self.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, it is through volition that human lives become meaningful.

As linguistic creatures who share a world of signification with one another, human beings inevitably inherit a field of meaning that helps them to define their identity and their values. For Kahn, there is no brute nature for human beings. Even things as basic and carnal as human sexuality and reproduction are already infused with meaning. Sexuality and human reproduction, for instance, produces familial bonds that is always already situated within a culture and political community.<sup>101</sup> Human beings are not self-contained individuals. They always find themselves part of a community, such as the family. But even families are not self-contained. A family exists within a culture and political order that determines its shape. Kahn points out that “Sexuality makes possible the political order by creating space for history, but politics makes sexuality possible by creating a meaning to fill that space.”<sup>102</sup> That is to say, without generational continuity—something the family guarantees—a political community cannot survive; yet on the other hand, without the polity, the family itself would lack significance.

Thus, human desire depends on an inherited world of signs that enables them to interpret their bodies and environment as having meaning. These signs are made explicit in public rituals such as corporate worship and the singing of the national anthem. Human bodies are, therefore, inevitable sites of meaning that transcend them.<sup>103</sup> Kahn believes it is mistaken to ground

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<sup>100</sup> Kahn, 17.

<sup>101</sup> Kahn, 191.

<sup>102</sup> Kahn, 191.

<sup>103</sup> Kahn, 186.

political community in a rational “social contract” as if the human community is a product of reason alone and not something more akin to religious faith and familial devotion.

Human beings, however, do not stand passively vis-à-vis the symbolic reality that organizes their desires. Inhabiting a field of meaning also requires receptivity on the part of the agent. Those who are attached to a particular symbolic reality must have some confidence in its ability to provide them with a meaningful life in order to remain in it. Kahn calls this receptivity “faith.”<sup>104</sup> Faith is, in essence, trust in the symbolic reality that organizes human desires. Without this trust, the symbolic reality human beings inherit would become less stable as other symbolic systems compete with it for their loyalty. Political revolutions take place when a sizeable number of people lose faith in their shared field of meaning, meaning that legitimates their political institutions. The object of faith, however, is not an object of choice. The object of faith makes a claim on human beings and seizes their imagination. This is why Kahn believes it is more appropriate to think of the event of inheriting a symbolic reality as an event of grace<sup>105</sup>

Faith is, of course, not self-explanatory. The object of faith must in some way attract us at a more fundamental level. The object of faith is an object of faith only if it evokes an erotic response. So, for Kahn what attaches subjects to the object of faith is the will. Through it, the human body is integrated into a symbolic reality. It is through the power of the will, Kahn points out, that the body performs the sphere of meaning that it receives in faith. Just so, the body becomes the idea incarnate.<sup>106</sup> Faith is, therefore, not separable from love (eros) and devotion. However, there is a gracious quality to meaning. Just as human beings are bound to their families

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<sup>104</sup> Kahn, 187.

<sup>105</sup> Kahn, 188.

<sup>106</sup> Kahn, 142.

in a relationship of affection that is not the result of choice, they bound to a political community because the field of meaning grabs their will and infuses their body with transcendent meaning.

Human beings receive their identity from the family they love. The family, in turn, receives it from the larger political community.<sup>107</sup> This larger community is necessarily political because it is a community sustained by a particular discourse about the good social life—a shared discourse that is simultaneously an object of constant negotiation as well as the frame within which negotiations happen. As Oliver O'Donovan points out, there is always a “sphere of communication” that makes sense of the debate about particular goods (e.g., the economy, education, and law) in the community.<sup>108</sup> This world of signs that provides human beings with a meaningful life is, therefore, inevitably intertwined with the physical community that expresses it. Both family and the political order, then, find their basis in love. Through love, individuals are integrated into a system of meaning that transcends them as mere individuals.

The “sacred” is the necessary correlate of love because the sacred is that for which we are willing to sacrifice.<sup>109</sup> Kahn notes that sacrifice is a “point at which the symbolic structure of meaning that is always present becomes particularly evident.”<sup>110</sup> Kahn argues that as Abraham and Isaac's story makes plain, sacrifice is the most determinate expression of love. This is because the object of faith and devotion is also the object of hope. It is through the sphere of meaning that citizens hope to transcend their mundane and finite existence. In other words, human beings seek to find immortality in their objects of faith and devotion.<sup>111</sup> He writes that “In

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<sup>107</sup> Kahn, 144.

<sup>108</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 29.

<sup>109</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 224.

<sup>110</sup> Kahn, 224.

<sup>111</sup> This claim contrasts with that of Arendt, who believes love belongs to the private sphere. A view that is representative of classical liberalism. For Hannah Arendt and many other

love, we find salvation from our own finitude. The only salvation that is possible is to read the self as the embodiment of an idea.”<sup>112</sup>

By idea, Kahn means the symbolic reality that defines the subject’s identity. The person who sacrifices might physically perish, but from her perspective, she will always live on through the political community. Benedict Anderson makes a similar point when suggesting that the nation, like religion, has the power to bestow “immortality” and to turn “fatality into continuity.”<sup>113</sup> Kahn argues that since human beings cannot save themselves—or create transcendent meaning—they always depend on a community for their existential immortality.<sup>114</sup>

## VI. The Nation-State as the Highest End

Indeed, the political community does not necessarily have to be the ultimate object of devotion. Kahn’s phenomenology does not show that this or that political community is inevitably the ultimate object of devotion. Instead, it shows that any attempt to explain the existence of a political community using cool reason alone is bound to fail. Furthermore, although Kahn does not state this explicitly, his analysis also reveals something about love. By showing that love itself happens within a world of signs, he also demonstrates that love itself is necessarily communal. This means that there must be a central object of love—mediated by what O’Donovan calls “representative signs” (i.e., symbols like the flag or founding political

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liberal philosophers, love belongs in the private realm of family and friendship. “[T]he bond of charity between people,” she argues, “is incapable of founding a public realm...”<sup>111</sup> Love, for Arendt, belongs in the family where affectionate attachments are appropriate, but it is ultimately irrelevant to the public realm, where lasting historical achievements happen. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53.

<sup>112</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 224.

<sup>113</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 10–11.

<sup>114</sup> Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 28.

documents that represent the entire sphere of meaning)—that undergirds every particular act of love.<sup>115</sup> In other words, one cannot love except in the company of others.<sup>116</sup> This social nature of love is why absent a transcendent object of love, a political community—whether organized in the shape of modern nation-states—risks becoming the ultimate object of faith.

Aquinas and Augustine clearly express the necessity of having an ultimate object of love in community. In the *Summa*, Aquinas argues that insofar as human beings will something, they necessarily will something ultimately. That is to say, insofar as human beings love anything at all, this love is always situated within a broader framework of ends organized around a highest end. He writes:

“Man must, of necessity, desire all, whatsoever he desires, for the last end. This is evident for two reasons. First, because whatever man desires, he desires it under the aspect of good. And if he desires it, not as his perfect good, which is the last end, he must, of necessity, desire it as tending to the perfect good, because the beginning of anything is always ordained to its completion”<sup>117</sup>

The necessity of having a highest end is a central insight of Aquinas’ analysis of the highest good: if we carefully analyze why we want what we want, we would eventually come to see what it is that we want for its own sake. For Aquinas, human beings can love many different things, but love is always oriented toward a hierarchical order of finite goods that only appear as goods within a transcendental horizon of the ultimate good. Similarly, for Augustine, political community is necessarily organized by an order of love organized around God.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 31.

<sup>116</sup> O’Donovan, 19.

<sup>117</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II Q. 1, Art. 6.

<sup>118</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), XIV.28.

In book 19 of Augustine's *City of God*, he famously wrote that "[a] people ... is a gathered multitude of rational beings united by agreeing to share the things they love."<sup>119</sup> For Augustine, a people is not united by their commitment to reason or by mutual benefit but by their common objects of love. Therefore, the quality of a people is not necessarily determined by their ethical ideals, but by their shared objects of affection. Kahn, although not a Christian, skillfully elaborates on this perennial truth.<sup>120</sup> For Kahn, human beings do not love in the abstract. Even a general love for humanity must take on a historically determinate shape within a community.<sup>121</sup> Love, he argues, is always expressed "in the particular."<sup>122</sup> In other words, human love is expressed in and through the community. However, because love is expressed in the particular, there could be multiple objects of love in competition with one another. In order to have some orientation in the world, subjects must, therefore, place objects of love on a "ladder."<sup>123</sup>

In addition, love, for Kahn, is fundamentally a creative event. It is creative, because love implies the hard work of sustaining the community that embodies the world of signification.<sup>124</sup> It is the communal dimension of love that makes it possible for subjects to share a symbolic world.<sup>125</sup> But since the field of meaning through which members of a community find their significance cannot be separated from the community that embodies it, they are also bound to one another in ties of affection. Subjects that belong to the same symbolic and political community love one another, because "they participate in a meaningful universe" that they

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<sup>119</sup> St. Augustine, IX.24.

<sup>120</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 225.

<sup>121</sup> Kahn, 223.

<sup>122</sup> Kahn, 223.

<sup>123</sup> Kahn, 225.

<sup>124</sup> Kahn, 224.

<sup>125</sup> Kahn, 225.

share.<sup>126</sup> A shared commitment to the field of meaning implies the willingness to sacrifice for the community itself. This implies the willingness to sublimate personal desires and preferences in order to align one's values with that of the political community.

This same point is made by Rowan Williams. Drawing from the works of Hannah Arendt, Williams argues that human beings are "finite and time bound" without a polity.<sup>127</sup> On their own, human beings are doomed to a life of insignificance. Their only hope of transcending mere life is to engage in a common world of language and signification actively. Through public engagement, human beings "become part of a tradition, a heritage."<sup>128</sup> In the public realm, citizens make a name for themselves by becoming part of a larger conversation and public memory that transcends space and time, which gives them a sense of immortality.<sup>129</sup> In other words, the public alone has the power to secure the meaning of one's life, because there are no purely "private" systems of signification.

The search for glory and recognition by the earthly city in Augustine's *City of God* is, then, merely a symptom of the human desire for meaning.<sup>130</sup> Since meaning, as we have seen, is generated and sustained by love, it cannot be separated from sacrifice. Love and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. Love is political, because what people think can legitimately demand sacrifice from them has existential power over them. Kahn is, therefore, correct to say that politics is fundamentally about the power over life and death.<sup>131</sup> Today, as Cavanagh points out, nothing can more legitimately demand sacrifice than the nation-state.

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<sup>126</sup> Kahn, 223.

<sup>127</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 107.

<sup>128</sup> Williams, 107.

<sup>129</sup> Williams, 108.

<sup>130</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.28.

<sup>131</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 80.



The enduring practice of torture demonstrates the sovereign power of the nation-state. In the Middle Ages, Kahn points out, torture was widely practiced not as a way to obtain information as contemporary people assume. Rather, torture is how the sovereign power of the body polity demonstrate its sacred authority over human bodies. In other words, torture and confession is how the symbolic order of the body polity props up and perpetuates its legitimacy. Under torture, victims are forced to confront his or her ultimate values and loyalties. The act of confession under torture should be understood as the power of the sacred—for which the monarch is a mediator—to take possession of the victim's body. The "truth" that is obtained through torture is, therefore, not information, but the legitimacy of the body polity's power over life and death.

For the victim of torture then, torture is a test of faith.<sup>132</sup> Torture, in Christendom, is about the contest between objects of loyalty for whom one is willing to give up his or her body. The victory of Christian martyrs under the Roman Empire was, therefore, the refusal of granting legitimacy to the sovereign power as embodied by the Roman Imperial cult. Their sacrifice was, in effect, an act of symbolic warfare against the body polity of Rome, a rival sovereign to that of Jesus. In torture, the body is inevitably a site of sacrifice. Kahn defines sacrifice as the "giving up of oneself to be acted on" by the sacred.<sup>133</sup> Whether the Christian martyrs would sacrifice for something was never the question. The question was for what they were willing to give up their bodies. Torture, then, is designed to produce sacrifice. For Kahn, a form of transubstantiation always happens in sacrifice: the body becomes the host through which the sacred is incarnate.

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<sup>132</sup> Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Kahn, 108.

This transubstantiation happens slightly differently in the modern West. As mentioned, the site of the sacred has shifted from the monarch to the citizens as a collective subject. Since in a democracy, the people, rather than the monarch, is the site of sacred sovereign, there is no longer a need for the mediation of torture. Kahn writes, “Since sovereignty no longer stands apart from the subject, its presence no longer terrorizes—although the awe remains.”<sup>134</sup> If the sovereign dwells in the people, then the domain of sacrifice is expressed primarily through warfare, and the risk that any citizens could be conscripted.<sup>135</sup> Warfare is the contemporary democratic form of medieval torture. The risk of conscription and its legal legitimacy is how the sacred power of the popular sovereign demonstrates its power over the bodies of citizens. The unitive power of nations, then, is dependent on its ability to move people into mass violence or, in other words, into the domain of sacrifice on behalf of the sacred power that permeates the social order.<sup>136</sup>

## VII. Sacrifice, Security, and Constantinian Control

Since many liberal citizens invest their love and faith in the popular sovereign, they are more than willing to sacrifice themselves for its sake. Like love, sacrifice is both passive and creative. The fact that people are willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation perpetuates (or creates) the power of the sacred sovereign over the citizens. This is why, as many commentators point out, war is always self-justifying. What is vital in modern warfare is not the cause, whether just or not. What is at stake is, as Hauerwas argues, that sacrifice is “repeated to show that we

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<sup>134</sup> Kahn, 34.

<sup>135</sup> Kahn, 35.

<sup>136</sup> Kahn, 65.

[citizens] are the rightful heirs of the sacrifices that we believe have been made on our behalf.”<sup>137</sup>

To put it another way, what matters is not the reason behind the command of sacrificial violence, but the power to command itself. Again, the being of the sacred power of nations precedes its essence. The love and devotion to the nation is logically prior to its shape or legal/moral structure. If this is true, then only one injunction remains absolute. It is the preservation of the political community. As previously mentioned, the preservation of the liberal order is how citizens achieve a semblance of immortality. Therefore, as long as the liberal order exists, so too shall salvation.

This implies that, for citizens, the meaning of existence is caught up in the survival of the polity. Therefore, any external threat to the polity must be dealt with by any means necessary, even if it violates the polity’s moral ideals. Any existential threat to the polity is a threat to the immortality or sacred identity of the citizens. The ticking time bomb scenario poses only one question to citizens: “what are you willing to do to save those you love?”<sup>138</sup> The universal value of liberalism is, he argues, unable to restrain the nation’s appetite for war and torture. The national security state, either by achieved by international intervention or mass surveillance, is just a possible outcome of the need to protect the nation from existential threats.

Americans may believe in liberal values, but liberal values mean nothing unless a liberal polity exists. Liberal orders, therefore, cannot avoid torture and war, because war and torture are about legitimating and perpetuating the social order. It is about the work to preserve what citizens consider to be the most sacred.<sup>139</sup> For Kahn, the realm of political love is intrinsically asymmetrical. Citizens who are devoted to their nations will always prioritize their polity over

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<sup>137</sup> Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, 59–60.

<sup>138</sup> Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 96–97.

<sup>139</sup> Kahn, 80.

that of the enemy's. This bias does not imply that liberal citizens are nihilists. Rather, it means that the being of their God, the nation, precedes its essence, liberalism.<sup>140</sup>

The irony of the liberal state, then, is this: while the liberal God speaks the language of law and reason, it must ultimately subordinate them to the higher end of self-preservation in a precarious world. This subordination is at the root of what Hauerwas calls constantinianism.<sup>141</sup> Instead of thinking about constantinianism as merely Christians captured by the lure of political power, it should be understood as the will to control. It is about controlling the outcome of history.

The fear of (existential) death leads directly to control. In the case of the liberal citizenry, what they want to achieve by controlling the world through warfare and political power is to ensure the survival of the liberal political order. The liberal order, therefore, cannot avoid fearing existential threats. A constantinian cannot help but strive for power because the meaning of his existence hinges on his ability to ensure the survival of the nation-state. Constantinianism is the drive to achieve immortality on our terms. This is what Hauerwas means when he claims that the "fear of death" is the core of the liberal political order.<sup>142</sup> Survival, in this model, will always trump liberal values. This is why, under the liberal order, the higher values of democracy and human rights, will always arrive too late.

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<sup>140</sup> Kahn, *Political Theology*, 60.

<sup>141</sup> Hauerwas, of course, borrowed this term from John Howard Yoder. See Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2012).

<sup>142</sup> Using theological language, Constantinianism belongs to the order of law rather than grace, precisely because immortality is not received, but achieved.

### VIII. Liberal Constantinianism and the Problem of Democratic Virtues

Liberalism's lack of a conception of the good is not the problem. Every political community presupposes some good that unifies the people under the political regime. Thus, Hollenbach's critique of liberalism does not go far enough. By bracketing the question of the good, as Keys points out, political liberals can conceal their underlying normative assumptions about the good. Kahn's phenomenology of political life reveals that what lies beneath political ethics is political theology. A political theology of the nation-state that prioritizes being over essence ends up cultivating a constantinian ethics of survival. Politics based on devotion to the nation-state cannot, therefore, sustain the virtues necessary for democratic politics, as the specter of existential enemies will always be threaten human rights and honest political discourse.

Alasdair MacIntyre's criticism of liberalism also reveals why without belief in a transcendent common good, politics—the work of figuring out about how to create a “just and generous ordering of a common life”—is impossible.<sup>143</sup> According to MacIntyre, much of modern ethics is reducible to emotivism. Also, modern forms of political organization also lack any compelling moral foundation. Therefore, for MacIntyre, the principles that govern modern institutions are managerial in form and nihilistic in substance.<sup>144</sup> As we have seen from Kahn, this nihilism is partly due to the voluntarist theology of the nation-state, which prioritizes being over essence. Therefore, those who are devoted to the nation-state do not recognize objective values beyond the nation-state itself.

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<sup>143</sup> Here I am borrowing Luke Bretherton's understanding of what politics means. See Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1.

<sup>144</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 114. “Whenever those immersed in the bureaucratic culture of the age try to think their way through to the moral foundations of what they are and what they do, they will discover suppressed Nietzschean premises.”

But if morality can be reduced to feelings, politics is doomed to be the site of perennial struggle between “wills to power.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, politics would be nothing more than the arbitrary attempt to determine the shape of the popular sovereign. Like Keys, MacIntyre argues that to transcend the limitations of contemporary politics, political agents must affirm an objective moral order of the common good that is not beholden to particular political communities and is, therefore, in a sense, transcendent. In other words, political agents must be more dedicated to the good than to their own communities and arbitrary agendas. Yet, a political order of the good cannot be sustained without people with the necessary habit to sustain such an order. Therefore, a good political community must help its members cultivate the relevant virtues.<sup>146</sup> Following Aquinas, MacIntyre believes a polity of the common good must be oriented to a true common end.<sup>147</sup> The good and the true are, however, excluded by the liberal commitment to bracket all truth claims in the political sphere. This means that the nation itself is the *de facto* ultimate good. However, what enables political discourse, in the classical model, is that the participants believe there is such a thing as the good life, a good life. Not only that, the good life must be itself a continuing conversation.

It is not necessary to follow MacIntyre in rejecting liberalism wholesale or to accept his account of liberalism. Nor is it necessary to hope for a pre-liberal political community organized by a thick conception of the good life, as Hollenbach would argue. However, MacIntyre’s critique of liberalism does reveal that a liberal political community cannot survive without the solidarity fostered by thicker traditions. Members of society must cultivate virtues that enable

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<sup>145</sup> MacIntyre, 111–14.

<sup>146</sup> MacIntyre, 263. This is why he thinks the only remaining hope for a better world resides in the formation of small communities committed to the quest for the good life

<sup>147</sup> Aquinas believes the unifying end of all human pursuits is beatitude.

them to be committed to democratic discourse, even when it becomes inconvenient to do so. The participants must, therefore, presuppose that life has an objective *telos* that transcends the political community.

Democratic ethos and commitment to liberal values presuppose certain conditions.<sup>148</sup> It is impossible to get into all the necessary conditions of democratic politics. This chapter will, therefore, only discuss three examples. First, in order to engage in democratic conversations in good faith and to preserve the integrity of democratic institutions, participants must strive for an undistorted view of themselves and their society.<sup>149</sup> This means that a polity for the common good must be willing to admit its past mistakes and guilt. The people of such a polity, therefore, must cultivate the virtue of remembrance. Second, they must also cultivate the virtue of truthfulness. Honest political debate is impossible when participants resort to violence and propaganda to settle disagreements.<sup>150</sup> Third, members of the polity must cultivate the virtue of hospitality. This virtue enables them to see strangers and the needy as integral parts of the community. Strangers and the marginalized can reveal truths of the political community that its long-standing members tend to neglect. Hauerwas, therefore, rightly argues that truth often comes from the margins of society.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> MacIntyre provides an account of virtues as the condition of possibility for rational deliberation in MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>149</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and David B. Burrell, "Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer's Inside the Third Reich," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 219.

<sup>150</sup> Without debates, the truth can be lost. Hauerwas points out that "no society can be just or good that is built on falsehood." Stanley Hauerwas, "Reforming Theological Ethics: Ten Theses," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>151</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 381.

These virtues can be sustained only when political “friends” and “enemies” stand in openness to one another to the extent that self-preservation becomes secondary. The preoccupation of the liberal order with self-preservation inevitably compromises these virtues. In order to preserve its stability, liberal society trains citizens to forget the uncomfortable truths about itself.<sup>152</sup> In order to preserve its identity and integrity, the liberal state encourages citizens to be suspicious of strangers, especially those who seem to have deeper religious loyalties. If the final end of a liberal polity is “nothing more than the perpetuation of [its] own existence,” it is no wonder that liberal societies cannot help but be constantinian.<sup>153</sup>

If control is the highest end of society, then the virtues of the citizens will be oriented towards that end. The virtues necessary for the flourishing of the democratic common good would then be sacrificed on the altar of security and war. Therefore, liberal societies face a two-pronged problem: first, without a sense of a transcendent common end, nation-states become ends in themselves. Second, since liberal political philosophy brackets the question of the good, it lacks resources capable of combating the nihilism of the political theology of the nation-state.

## IX. Conclusion

It seems clear that constantinianism as a political ethos of control is only necessary if members of a society stake the meaning of their lives on something that needs to be propped up

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<sup>152</sup> According to Ernst Renan, the nation-state project is founded on the ability to forget original violence. “To forget—and I will venture to say—to get one’s history wrong are essential factors in the making of a nation: and thus the advance of historical studies is often a danger to nationality. Historical research, in fact, casts fresh light upon those deeds of violence which have marked the origin of all political formations, even of those which have been followed by the most beneficial results. Unity is always realized by brute force.” Ernst Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” in *The Nationalist Reader*, ed. Moar Chabour and Micheline R. Ishay (New York: Humanities Press, 1995), 153.

<sup>153</sup> Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, 276.



by human sacrifice—the nation state. It follows, then, that the fear of existential death is rooted in an idolatrous or disordered love.<sup>154</sup> This idolatry is what compromises the ability of citizens to develop the virtues necessary to sustain a democratic polity for the common good. Furthermore, liberalism as a political philosophy also lacks adequate resources that could make sense of the cultivation of the virtues that are necessary for democratic deliberation, because it brackets questions of the good. Political liberalism, by itself, is therefore not equipped to deal with the problem of liberal societies. Liberal social orders depend on communities of comprehensive doctrines capable of fostering the necessary democratic virtues. To go beyond the limitations of nationalism, a properly theological politics and a community with loyalties that transcend the nation-state are necessary.

Later, this dissertation contends (in Chapter 3) that one contribution Christianity can make to contemporary politics is to share its common good—friendship with God made possible by Jesus—with the world. This does not necessarily entail the conversion of others to Christianity. Rather, this sharing must many forms, including cooperating with people of other religious traditions to thicken the public culture. One form it could take is that the church, through its preaching, works of mercy, and political struggles, demonstrates that the cross has made constantinianism and the sacrifices it demands unnecessary so that citizens can be freed to be citizens without investing an idolatrous devotion in their political community.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Book XV Ch. 4.

<sup>155</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 30.

## Chapter 2: The Limits of Radical Democracy

### Introduction

The thesis of the previous chapter is that democracy faces more challenges than the problem of individualism or liberalism's lack of a conception of the good life. Politics entails loyalty, devotion, and sacrifice. Politics life, therefore, inevitably raises theological questions about what is worthy of loyalty and devotion for Christians. So, by focusing too much on the liberal account of political life, theological ethicists can miss the opportunity to address the problem of treating political society the ultimate end. This chapter focuses on two political thinkers, William E. Connolly and Romand Coles, who move beyond this narrow preoccupation with the analytical framework of political liberalism.

Both thinkers recognize the limits of liberal democracy and write from a postliberal perspective. They are selected for close engagement for three reasons. First, because they represent the most mature thinkers of a political movement inflected by postmodern philosophies and so can be taken to be representative figures. Like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Bonnie Honig, Connolly and Coles are committed to an agonistic democratic ethos that challenges the hegemony of political liberalism.<sup>156</sup> Agonists are suspicious of models of liberalism that feign neutrality and instead favors a more hermeneutical approach to politics that acknowledges the impossibility of moral objectivity.<sup>157</sup> Agonists, then, tend to interpret politics as a struggle for hegemony between incompatible political frameworks, values, and identities.

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<sup>156</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000); Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>157</sup> See Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 20–22.

Nonetheless, as some critics of agonists point out, agonists continue to take many liberal democratic values for granted without feeling to need to justify them.<sup>158</sup>

Second, they are also aware that democratic politics requires building networks of political alliance across religious, traditional, and identity boundaries. In other words, they argue for the thickening of democratic culture beyond the confines of the liberal “overlapping consensus” by resourcing different theological and ethical traditions. Furthermore, unlike other thinkers in the agonist tradition, Connolly and Coles seek to provide a positive account of political solidarity that transcends national boundaries. This latter aspect of their thinking is important because it has obvious implications for the problem of loyalty and devotion discussed in chapter one. Third, Connolly and Coles both engage with Christian thought in their works and make room for metaphysical and religious beliefs in political thought, though they both set up normative limits of how religious people should hold their convictions. This means that Christian thinking about the public significance of religion must contend with their positions.

The problem with liberal democracy is, for Coles and Connolly, that it is not democratic enough. They identified the primary problem of liberal democratic politics as its tendency toward social homogeneity and epistemic totalization. They find liberalism as a political framework problematic because it prematurely shuts down discourse and imposes a (supposedly) politically neutral procedural framework on members of society. However, the neutral framework is often hijacked by a politics of identity that seeks to solidify national identity and silence diversity. They see liberals as often being complicit in anti-democratic forces—whether it be nationalism

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<sup>158</sup> Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 270. Mathewes suggests, for instance, that agonists still want to play “referee” by “offering a theory of politics capable of accommodating and organizing conflicts among the very divergent political positions present in any society.”

or the concentration of corporate power—because it shuts out resources for the renewal of democratic energies and fosters resentment among those whose voices liberalism has excluded. In other words, liberalism’s limitation lies in its inability to deal with questions of political identity, as the previous chapter argues.<sup>159</sup>

Again, following the radical democratic tradition pioneered by Mouffe and others, Connolly and Coles propose that the solution to liberal societies’ democratic deficit is by way of agonistic struggle against the politics of closure.<sup>160</sup> Agonism makes politics more sensitive to the marginalized others in society and is thus capable of revitalizing democratic discourse at a time when political power is increasingly concentrated. This chapter contends that both fail to provide compelling frameworks for democratic struggles against the forces of nationalism and the concentration of political power because their programs lack theological substance. First, while these thinkers mine various ethical or theological traditions for insights, their ontological commitments prevent them from being committed to the truth claims of any particular tradition. Like the political liberals they criticize, they seem to take their ethical convictions for granted. Furthermore, they are unconcerned that many of the values they find compelling in the traditions they resource against liberalism and nationalism cannot easily be separated from the internal

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<sup>159</sup> In order to be fair to liberals, it should also be noted that, as a political theory of justice, liberalism is simply not meant to address such questions.

<sup>160</sup> Honig, for instance, seeks to decenter the politics of sovereignty, which conceives of political history as a linear series of events defining the character of a social body, such as the United States. She resists such a politics of “singularity” and, instead, favors a politics of pluralism characterized by “openness” and “receptivity.” In other words, she argues that political acts, such as the (sovereign) decision of a judge or a president, should not be read as events of closure, but as events of ambiguity whose meaning can forever be contested and reinterpreted. See, especially, Honig’s discussion of the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig: Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, 87–111.

logic of those traditions. Their use of the traditions they favor appears arbitrary, especially given their neo-Nietzschean premises.

Second, it is doubtful that the ethical alternatives they offer, which is not rooted in the practice of any community, in particular, can generate alternative forms of solidarity that could sustain the democratic ethics they value, especially when confronting existential threats. In the end, they do not provide adequate alternatives that could address the problems they confront. This chapter begins with a close analysis of Connolly's political project. Its positive contributions, as well as limitations, will be noted. Similarly, this chapter will then subject Cole's political project to critical scrutiny, noting its positive contributions and shortcomings. The critical analysis of this chapter will pave the way for a more positive constructive political theology in the next chapter by outlining the basic conditions of an adequate political theology.

### I. William Connolly's Critique of the Logic of Identity

Connolly's critical engagement with the politics of neoliberal globalization and resurgent nationalism in the United States has received much-deserved attention, especially on the left.<sup>161</sup> Connolly's contributions to political theory have drawn this attention because he challenges the traditional liberal conception of multiculturalism and offers an alternative that is potentially more appropriate for a globalizing world. More than his other agonist allies, such as Mouffe, Laclau, and Honig, Connolly does not shy away from metaphysics or deny that there is a need to ground one's political ethics in a positive vision of human flourishing. For Connolly, politics is

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<sup>161</sup> Political theorists as diverse as Jodi Dean, Bonnie Honig, and Wendy Brown have all seriously engaged with Connolly's contributions: see David Campbell and Morton Schoolman, eds., *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, n.d.); Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

impossible without the simultaneous cultivation of “mood, belief, desire, and action.”<sup>162</sup>

Connolly’s work, therefore, brings the ontological assumptions of radical democracy as a political project to the fore as a resource to help energize democratic politics and to foster an alternative basis of solidarity than that of nationalism. It means that his work is fertile ground for serious theological engagement.<sup>163</sup>

The primary object of Connolly’s political criticisms is political theory’s failure to recognize the fundamental “fragility” of the human condition.<sup>164</sup> By fragility, Connolly calls to attention the multivalent and unpredictable processes of becoming that characterize ecological systems and socio-political institutions. He wants to stress that reality cannot be subjected to a singular logic or explanation. For instance, the problem with neoliberalisms, for Connolly, is that it functions too much like a theodicy. That is to say, adherents of liberalism too easily sweep the evils neoliberalism generates under the rug by justifying their necessity.<sup>165</sup> Consequences, such as the precarious situation of the working class and pollution are, thus, often said to be necessary evils for the greater good of the impersonally rational market. Neoliberalism, as a totalizing ideology, overextends itself by colonizing reality under a single teleology and, thus, explaining away its dark underside. The word fragility describes how these social and natural processes resist comprehension and every attempt at mastery.

Connolly is likewise suspicious of theological and metaphysical metanarratives that proclaim to have the last word on the current shape as well as the final *telos* of the world. The

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<sup>162</sup> William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 147.

<sup>163</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 92.

<sup>164</sup> William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>165</sup> Connolly, 6.

metaphysical narratives that are too certain of itself, Connolly believes, could cultivate “hubris” that might lead to an “existential resentment” for those who do not share one’s perspective.<sup>166</sup> Worse yet—and this is Connolly’s primary concern—these narratives could foster actions that further speed up and fuel the destructive political and environmental forces that could undermine the mutual flourishing of humans and the environment.

Connolly’s concern for the fragile or tragic dimensions of political life follows from his lifelong commitment to address the difficulties of multiculturalism inherent in Western liberal democratic societies, especially in the United States. Connolly sees what he calls “identitarian politics” as the enemy of democratic politics.<sup>167</sup> By identitarian politics, he means politics grounded in the lowest social common denominator, whether it be race, religion, or a shared commitment to liberal public reason. Connolly sees in these kinds of political projects the tendency to subject activism to a totalizing logic. However, Connolly does not wish to eliminate different metaphysical narratives. What he resists is the tendency of adherents of different metaphysical narratives to see their perspective as final and uncontestable. The mistake of liberalism, for Connolly, is that in combating what liberals take to be “religious enthusiasm and dogmatism,” they are also “pressed to be pugnacious against asecular, nontheistic perspectives that call their assumptions into question.”<sup>168</sup> He thinks the liberal way of engaging with political difference is also counterproductive, because it thins out the public sphere of the cultural

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<sup>166</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 6–7.

<sup>167</sup> In this chapter, the word “identitarian” rather than “unitarian” is used in order to avoid confusion with Unitarianism as a religion. William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005), 29.

<sup>168</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 4–5.

substances and, borrowing a phrase from Charles Taylor, “moral sources” that are capable of forming deep, visceral forms of attachments.<sup>169</sup>

The result of this liberal thinning out of public culture is a constitutionally and procedurally oriented liberal state without existential resources—such as values, theological narratives, and so on—that could mediate the relationship of citizens in a state. This results in the breakdown of solidarity and the resurgence of “bellicose constituencies” poised to reintroduce religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities into the culturally empty public space in a violent and authoritarian way.<sup>170</sup> This stripping away of the public sphere of all cultural substance deemed “private” or “unreasonable” triggers a response that poses a greater threat than what liberalism can restrain. Even today, many citizens living in liberal democratic societies continue to believe that in order for political institutions to function properly, there must be a defining common identity that supports the imaginary of a nation, whether it be a common language, history, or civil religion.

## II. Connolly’s Critique of Identitarian Politics

For Connolly, resurgent nationalism is cause for concern, because the commonalities demanded by a nation are never shared among all the constituents in a pluralistic state. In the history of Western political discourse, a nation often refers to a group of people with a set of commonalities such as race, religion, language, collective will, and heritage.<sup>171</sup> According to Connolly, until recently, Europeans have generally considered race to be the unifying factor of a nation.<sup>172</sup> However, Connolly points out, the idea of a unified race is itself historically

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<sup>169</sup> Connolly, 91.

<sup>170</sup> Connolly, 91.

<sup>171</sup> Connolly, 75.

<sup>172</sup> Connolly, 73–74.



constructed.<sup>173</sup> Therefore, Connolly writes, “Today, race is widely understood to be a fable through which a people might consolidate its unity rather than the paradigm of what collective unity as such looks like.”<sup>174</sup> Furthermore, Connolly argues that once the idea of a unified race is called into question, other bases of a unified nation must likewise fall apart. Many political entities are, after all, characterized by “hybridity” along linguistic, ideological, religious, and ethical lines.<sup>175</sup>

Connolly thinks Ernest Renan might be right in suggesting that without some basis of national solidarity, no one would be willing to “risk death to defend the state or to fight for its glory.”<sup>176</sup> Having a collective national identity is often thought to be indispensable for the modern state and its political institutions. It is partly because, as Calhoun points out, a nation is often thought of as what gives the state its sovereignty and democratic legitimacy.<sup>177</sup> At the same time, the commonalities demanded by a nation are not always shared among all the constituents. So, according to Connolly, what is more important for national identity is not necessarily race, religion, language, or even ethics, but a collective memory of shared “sacrifice and a common will in the present.”<sup>178</sup> However, memories that are conducive to national identity must necessarily selectively underplay or, more problematically, erase the “multiplicity,” “violence,” and “exclusions” out of which they are formed.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> See Renan, “What Is a Nation?”

<sup>174</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 74.

<sup>175</sup> Connolly, 74–75.

<sup>176</sup> Connolly, 74; Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

<sup>177</sup> Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream*, 48.

<sup>178</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 75.

<sup>179</sup> Connolly, 76.

Connolly suggests that the inherent selectivity of national memory could be the reason why those who are defined by nationalists as the enemies of the nation are often precisely the groups that do not easily fit into any collective memory: people who narrate their collective histories—sometimes in direct confrontation with hegemonic memories—such as Jews and Native Americans.<sup>180</sup> The selectivity of national memory could, therefore, be easily leveraged to undermine the rights of minorities. Liberals, Connolly argues, necessarily finds nationalism repugnant. Interestingly enough, though, Connolly also accuses liberals of the same. Because while liberals reject nationalism and modern “conservative nationalism,” they continue to affirm the necessity of a collective national identity, albeit at a different register.<sup>181</sup> John Stuart Mill is one such liberal for Connolly.

For Connolly, while Mill “honors individuality, tolerance, agitation of public opinion by creative minorities and active participation by people in their own governance,” he paradoxically proposes his brand of “civilization” and “progress” that produces its own enemies. According to Connolly, Mill’s version of civilization requires a long process of inculcation and discipline that prepares the people for democratic participation. In the case of the Western world, the Judeo-Christian heritage did the trick: the Jewish-Christian heritage made way for democracy through the “restrained dissidence between the priests and the prophets.”<sup>182</sup> In other words, for Connolly, Mill believes the Judeo-Christian culture paved the way for representational government because it fostered a tradition of dissent. Connolly rejects Mill’s idea of “civilizational development,”

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<sup>180</sup> Connolly, 77.

<sup>181</sup> Connolly, 77.

<sup>182</sup> Connolly, 78.

because it presupposes that the people must share the same “linguistic, religious, and moral heritage.”<sup>183</sup>

How can Mill claim to honor genuine dissent, when he obviously supports cultural monism? According to Connolly, the dissenting minority Mill welcomes in his model still belongs to a people who share the same linguistic and religious identity and are welcomed only insofar as they are supportive of Mill’s vision of liberal society. Connolly explains that Mill is willing to grant peoples who have “sentiments of nationality” and who happen to occupy the same territorial space the right to form a state.<sup>184</sup> However, Connolly points out that this act of granting legitimacy to states based on sentiments of nationality neglects to recognize that most territories contain constituencies who “divide along numerous dimensions,” such as religion and language.<sup>185</sup> More importantly, Connolly points out that the idea of a shared national identity creates a tension between the necessity of a regulative cultural “center” and the reality that this center is “always insufficiently available.”<sup>186</sup> This is especially true, given that the speed of pluralization has accelerated significantly due to globalization.

For Connolly, this tension between the center and the periphery renders the state dangerously vulnerable to hostile “takeover attempts” by citizens who believe they exemplify this cultural “center.”<sup>187</sup> For example, white supremacists in the United States, if given enough political power and legitimacy, might attempt to purge the state of people of color, because they believe that being white should be the normative basis of citizenship. For Connolly, Mill’s approach to

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<sup>183</sup> Connolly, 79. Connolly is not being entirely fair to Mill since democracy as a political concept did not appear out of thin air. Mill could be said to be simply acknowledging that democracy has a history.

<sup>184</sup> Connolly, 80.

<sup>185</sup> Connolly, 80.

<sup>186</sup> Connolly, 81.

<sup>187</sup> Connolly, 81.

nationhood also requires forgetfulness about the past violence on which the image of a nation is founded. He observes that the emergence of a clearly defined nation always occurs at the expense of the less powerful or persecuted minorities.

Connolly, therefore, berates liberals like Mill for placing too much emphasis on identity and unity while neglecting the “indeterminacies and hybridities” of reality.<sup>188</sup> Nationalism’s promise of future unity is, for Connolly, “defined less by positive exemplification than by marking a set of constituents who deviate from it in need of assimilation, correction, punishment, or elimination.”<sup>189</sup> Because every criterion in marking these deviant constituents is bound to be arbitrary, nationalism conflicts severely with the ideals of democracy. Connolly writes that “a nation has become a form that can be promised to some only because it is denied violently to others.”<sup>190</sup>

### III. Connolly’s Ethos of Public Engagement

Connolly does not believe Rawlsian and Habermasian liberalism attenuates the danger of identitarian politics. For him, secularizing the nation in Rawlsian and Habermasian terms consist in replacing the word “nation” with the secular idea of “public sphere.”<sup>191</sup> Once the switch is made, Rawls and Habermas’ model would proceed to thin out the public sphere by confining religion, race, sexuality, and other critical dimensions of human life to the private sphere. This thinning out of the public sphere is thought, by liberals, to be able to reduce unnecessary quarrels by limiting public conversations to that which most reasonable people would tend to agree.

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<sup>188</sup> Connolly, 82.

<sup>189</sup> Connolly, 82.

<sup>190</sup> Connolly, 87.

<sup>191</sup> Connolly, 91.

However, as Connolly argues, this thinning out of the public sphere would reduce the nation into mere “allegiance to a common constitution, or a set of generally stated rights, or the practice of justice, or an authoritative mode of public engagement.”<sup>192</sup> Such treatment of the public sphere, as Connolly rightly points out, creates a cultural void in the public sphere.

Consequently, those who are sympathetic towards nationalism would again have powerful incentives to fill that void by striving to reinstate the nation, according to their standard of race, religion, and language. In the end, Connolly argues, secularizing the nation, instead of addressing the danger of nationalism, only leads to the dangerous possibility of violent persecution of the minorities. Clearly, for Connolly, nationalisms of both conservative and liberal forms are deeply at odds with democratic values. This leads him to postulate that a successful alternative theory of political pluralism must avoid the notion that a common national identity is necessary for good government. He seeks to retrieve the best of both liberal democratic thought and the innate human desire for a deeper basis of political solidarity without falling prey to the allure of nationalism.

An adequate political program, then, must do justice to both secular tolerance and appreciation for differences and the need for culture and tradition without a shared national identity. This alternative political attachment, Connolly explains, should “[rework] the idea of a cultural center” by pluralizing the public culture “along multiple dimensions.”<sup>193</sup> According to Connolly, in this model, the public would be “constituted by multiple minorities, divided along more numerous lines of religion, linguistic habit, economic interests, irreligion, ethnicity, sensuality, gender performances, and moral sources of inspiration.”<sup>194</sup> For Connolly,

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<sup>192</sup> Connolly, 91.

<sup>193</sup> Connolly, 92.

<sup>194</sup> Connolly, 92.

constituencies, in this model, would share common commitments to the same democratic procedures while honoring differences. Connolly proposes that these common procedures should be “a general ethos negotiated between constituencies honoring a variety of moral sources.”<sup>195</sup> He believes this general ethos, as a new transcendental horizon of democracy, would help to create new ways to actualize justice and establish political legitimacy for minorities.

This ethos encourages citizens to bring multiple existential resources that inform their politics, such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and moral orientations into public engagement as part of the effort to form this general ethos. Allowing these cultural contents into the public sphere would ensure that public culture remains rich and also encourage citizens to come to terms with the contestability of their positions.<sup>196</sup> Here is the one caveat of Connolly’s ethos. In order for a general ethos to be viable, Connolly argues, it must be refined by the constituents’ mutual acknowledgment of the contestability of their respective moral and political convictions. In other words, for Connolly, the successful development of a general ethos would require citizens to cultivate a degree of “generosity” and “forbearance” toward others’ political positions and humility toward one’s own.<sup>197</sup> Later on, Connolly names this new public ethos as a “bicameral orientation” toward political engagement.<sup>198</sup>

He argues that in order to develop this ethos, citizens must first grasp the nature of the drive toward identitarian nationalism. For him, the drive behind such political projects is a certain kind of faith or a sense or commitment to a vision of the “ultimate character of being.”<sup>199</sup> Faith, as Connolly defines it, contains two important dimensions. One deals with beliefs about divinity,

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<sup>195</sup> Connolly, 92.

<sup>196</sup> Connolly, 39; Connolly, *Pluralism*, 81.

<sup>197</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 156.

<sup>198</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 4.

<sup>199</sup> Connolly, 25.

morality, and salvation. The other deals with “embodied feelings, habits of judgment, and patterns of conduct below direct intellectual control.”<sup>200</sup> In this picture, according to Connolly, faith reaches far beyond the confines of rationality and doctrinal reflection into the visceral registers of human existence; therefore, when it is violated, the whole being of the person is “rattled.”<sup>201</sup> Connolly argues that one’s faith needs other faiths to provide it “with needed contrasts through which to demarcate itself.”<sup>202</sup> However, he acknowledges that alternative faiths can also threaten one’s own faith when the contrast becomes incommensurable. When this happens, Connolly says, an alternative faith would cause one to “anathematize it as inferior or evil and can usher into being the demand to take revenge against them [people of other faiths] for internal disturbances they sow.”<sup>203</sup>

Therefore, Connolly believes that the cultivation of a “bicameral orientation” towards faiths is paramount to respecting differences without falling into the trap of totalizing political projects.<sup>204</sup> A bicameral orientation means that each person must “cultivate” their faith “in the company of others in the first instance.”<sup>205</sup> First, for Connolly, before anyone could learn how to properly engage with other political ideologies and religious traditions in the public sphere, one must understand and accept the reality of diversity and “the impossibility of generalizing territorial monism peacefully in a world marked by such plurality.”<sup>206</sup> Second, Connolly suggests that communities of faith should begin to develop a “relational self-modesty” that is primarily

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<sup>200</sup> Connolly, 26.

<sup>201</sup> Connolly, 26.

<sup>202</sup> Connolly, 27.

<sup>203</sup> Connolly, 27. For Connolly, faith is ubiquitous. So, it is not only religious people who have faith.

<sup>204</sup> Connolly, 31.

<sup>205</sup> Connolly, 41.

<sup>206</sup> Connolly, 41.

motivated by the will to undermine faith's propensity for active intolerance. Third, a generous ethos of engagement must be negotiated between faiths, which would not be required to leave behind any part of themselves in order to create an environment of civil discourse.<sup>207</sup>

For Connolly, this bicameral orientation could not work unless it transforms the way people "feel" about differences. Eventually, Connolly argues, when citizens can see the profound contestability of their convictions, then productive political engagement can truly take place. Contestability means that no one's conviction should be seen as absolute. Connolly gives LGBT activism in the United States as an example of how bicameral orientation works in practice. For Connolly, as LGBT activists work to pluralize sexual and gender norms, those who are straight also begins to de-universalize their sexual sensibilities by their encounter with others that are different from them.

Contrary to what many critics of pluralism charge, Connolly argues that the affirmation of bicameral pluralism does not preclude citizens from holding real convictions. For Connolly, one need not give up his or her beliefs; rather, one merely needs to recognize that it is possible for others, given different circumstance, to believe in different things. Connolly recognizes that this will not come naturally. On the other hand, Connolly argues, as one continues to practice this way of thinking conscientiously, then "it begins to sink into the visceral register that promotes conduct on its own and also flows into conscious beliefs and judgments."<sup>208</sup> In other words, Connolly believes that the conscious cultivation of a bicameral orientation towards faiths will rewire one's mental and visceral processes to the point that positive reactions to differences become automatic.

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<sup>207</sup> Connolly, 41.

<sup>208</sup> Connolly, 33.



Connolly argues that because the pluralization of the public culture would actively honor diverse moral sources and allow constituents to express themselves in public freely, there would be a rich national cultural without a shared national identity. Connolly points out that, since public culture would be pluralized to the degree that no one could legitimately claim to be part of a majority, “claim by any constituency to occupy the lack at the center of the putative nation will be met by suspicion from numerous sources.”<sup>209</sup> For Connolly, if no one in a state can claim hegemony over what a collective national identity should be, there would be much more room for constituents to form alliances across racial, religious, and linguistic lines. According to Connolly, the new ethos of political engagement should, therefore, enable the political sphere to have a certain degree of fluidity to evolve and adapt to the shifting demands of the state, such as the needs of immigrants and racial minorities. For Connolly, the proper functioning of democracy depends on its ability to adapt to the fluid and hybrid context of a globalizing world.

#### IV. Connolly’s Ontology and Ethics

Even if Connolly is generous towards religious faith, he denies that there is any necessary relationship between ethics and ontology. He affirms with David Hume that ethics is grounded in human sentiments.<sup>210</sup> Therefore, he asserts that ethics has to do more with cultivation and inspiration than with argumentation—though argumentation does play a role in clarifying ethical positions. Nonetheless, he thinks ontology can provide ethics with a degree of illumination by bringing “into the open features of the world that would otherwise remain in the shadows.”<sup>211</sup> In

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<sup>209</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 93.

<sup>210</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 293–94.

<sup>211</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 81.

this way, he is different from his other fellow agonists. Connolly believes his multidimensional pluralism is a natural ally of an ontology of “becoming.”<sup>212</sup>

Connolly developed his ontology of becoming in many places, but its basic components are most clearly set out in his 2005 and 2011 monographs, *Pluralism* and *A World of Becoming*. With William James, Connolly finds the view that the “universe itself is pluralistic” compelling.<sup>213</sup> By pluralistic, he means both being is itself not “susceptible” to a systematic comprehension.<sup>214</sup> Connolly does not limit this principle to the realm of epistemology—in the sense that human beings simply lack the ability to comprehend being as a whole—but extends it into a general metaphysics of being.

The reality, for him, contains “litter” that resists the rational order human beings tend to impose on it.<sup>215</sup> Thus, quite consistently, Connolly rejects, alongside William James, the idea of a transcendent God who lies outside of contingent being and comprehends the whole of reality as a teleologically infused totality. However, Connolly does welcome a more limited and contingent god (or gods) who is a being (or beings) among other beings and who, therefore, are subjected to the same limitations of other beings.<sup>216</sup> The messy nature of reality entails that there are multiple ways for human beings to make sense of it. These attempts to intellectually make sense of reality Connolly calls projections or faiths.<sup>217</sup> He includes his own ontology as being among the faiths and thus similarly contestable.

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<sup>212</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 94–96; Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 68–123.

<sup>213</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 68.

<sup>214</sup> Connolly, 70.

<sup>215</sup> Connolly, 72.

<sup>216</sup> This is why Connolly is a sympathetic co-traveler of many theologians of becoming, such as Alfred North Whitehead and Catherine Keller.

<sup>217</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 73.

Closely connected to Connolly's understanding of a pluralistic universe is the idea that reality is always on the move. Different forces—social, emotional, economic, and environmental—continue to run into each other producing surprising and unpredictable outcomes. Drawing from Henri Bergson, Connolly defends a view of time as duration.<sup>218</sup> That is to say, time is neither progressive (as in teleology) or chaotic (as in materialism), but always producing the new through the confluence of these complex processes. It follows that Connolly also rejects the idea that reality is inherently purposive. The new that is produced is the product of both human and non-human “self-organizing” systems.<sup>219</sup> What this ontology of becoming allows Connolly to see is precisely the fragility of all things. Without a divine savior, there is no guarantee that the world will head in a desirable direction. Without the possibility of a totalizing comprehension of everything, no theological or philosophical reductionism would be possible.

Most importantly, a world of becoming is a bearer of many possibilities. A world of becoming gives Connolly hope that even when things seem dark, a better world might still emerge from the wreckage of the past.<sup>220</sup> Connolly refuses to ground this hope in metaphysics. Instead, he eschews the foundationalist idea that a combination of rigorous philosophical argumentation and empirical observation could settle the question of whose metaphysical faith is “true”. Philosophy, for Connolly, is always “inflected” by a person's character and attitude. Metaphysical positions are adopted, precisely because they “speak to” a person's “intimate experience of the world and his hopes for it.”<sup>221</sup> As already mentioned, Connolly resists a tight connection between ontology and ethics. He does not believe accepting his ontology of

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<sup>218</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 70–71.

<sup>219</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 95–97.

<sup>220</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 79–80.

<sup>221</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 71.

becoming entails the acceptance of his ethics of political project. With James, Connolly affirms the fundamental irreducibility of an ethical sensibility that comes prior to metaphysical systems.

Therefore, for Connolly, James' philosophy must still be joined together with a visceral attachment or love of a world as becoming in order to ground his political project.<sup>222</sup> This visceral embrace of the protean world of becoming and the life that it makes possible cannot be grounded in reason, but can only be evoked by inspiration and aesthetic attraction.<sup>223</sup> He believes that there is a fundamental "evolutionary instinct" that comes prior to any actual ethical commitment that is pressed upon this same instinct by social, rhetorical, and aesthetic inspiration.<sup>224</sup> Ethics, for Connolly as a Humean and Nietzschean, is not a matter of imperatives, but a matter of desire or love.<sup>225</sup> Connolly, does not accept Hume's and Nietzsche's ethical views. Instead, Connolly believes their contribution lies in providing a better description of what ethics entails. One could then, combine their metaethics with the multitude of ethical options on the table.<sup>226</sup>

Connolly, therefore, replaces "the quest to discover transcendent meaning with a readiness to invest selective activities with meaning."<sup>227</sup> In other words, while his ontology of becoming provides a framework for him to comprehend the world, his ethical sensibility provides the criteria of what is or is not a desirable development within the world of becoming. The project in

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<sup>222</sup> Connolly, 77.

<sup>223</sup> Connolly, 90–93.

<sup>224</sup> Connolly, 117.

<sup>225</sup> This might actually bring Connolly closer to Augustine as well, whose theological vision he vehemently rejects.

<sup>226</sup> This is the basic affirmation of his rebuttal of Christian critics of post-Nietzscheanism, such as Charles Taylor. William E. Connolly, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 179–81.

<sup>227</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 80.

which he invests his energies and ethical commitment is to help foster a world where creativity, diversity, human needs, and human capacities are maximized.<sup>228</sup>

## V. The Limits of Connolly's Radical Democratic Politics

Though a critic of liberalism, Connolly's political project can be interpreted, as Kristen Deede Johnson argues, to be a radicalization of liberalism's central premises.<sup>229</sup> Deeply embedded in Connolly's bicameral ethos of political engagement is the ethical priority of cultural and religious diversity, which is grounded in his understanding that human beings can be (reasonably) attached to a variety of metaphysical narratives. However, it is difficult to see what sets Connolly apart from Rawls and other liberals apart from his willingness to engage in metaphysical speculations. While Connolly rejects the early Rawls' unencumbered self—something Michael Sandel ruthlessly criticized—he shares with early Rawls the premise that as far as politics is concerned the maintenance of a liberal ethos rules out certain forms of comprehensive doctrines as inadmissible.<sup>230</sup> Although Connolly accepts that human beings are social and are necessarily formed by its attachments, loyalties, and loves, he goes further than Rawls by criticizing worldviews that embrace philosophical systems and teleology.

It is important to note that, like defenders of liberalism, Connolly intends his ethos of pluralization to be widely acceptable across confessional lines. Still, it is difficult to read Connolly as not asking his fellow citizens to treat pluralism as a higher end than what is

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<sup>228</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 92.

<sup>229</sup> Johnson argues that underneath Connolly's respect of differences is an even deeper respect for individuals who have different existential faiths (using Connolly's term). Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 130–31.

<sup>230</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 154–68.

delineated as the objective good in metaphysical doctrines other than his own. Connolly merely replaces Rawls' overlapping consensus with his bicameral ethics of political engagement. This difficulty follows from the general contour of his argument for his ethos of pluralization: what he asks of his fellow citizens is not primarily to find truths in other traditions that they could appreciate—although he would certainly be open to this—but that they should come to see their faiths as one contestable option among many.

So, Connolly's argumentative appeal to those who do not necessarily share his metaphysics is firstly an epistemological one. Here, one must be grateful to Connolly for further removing religion and ethics from a foundationalist framework. Still, the rejection of foundationalism and naïve realism does not necessarily lead to an ethos of generosity or clarify what should and should not be tolerated. Recognizing that one's position is contestable does not necessarily mean that one is morally committed to treat it as relativize, as Slavoj Žižek makes clear.<sup>231</sup> One could dogmatically embrace one's ethical stance without argumentation. In fact, this might be a more natural conclusion of Connolly's metaethics sentiments.

One might justifiably ask, at this juncture of Connolly's argument, what positive reasons there might be for others to embrace his ethos of pluralization. Recall Connolly draws a very sharp line between metaphysics and ethics. This is, of course, due to his rejection of any political form that might be similar to Augustinian Christianity or political projects following its

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<sup>231</sup> For Žižek, the power of human freedom is precisely to turn the contingent into the necessary. In other words, one could be passionately committed to a metaphysical worldview that one knows is contingent from the third-person perspective. His point is that a free human person does not necessarily have to adopt the third-person "objective" perspective and his ability to embrace a political project passionately, even if he knows that it is relative, is precisely what freedom is all about. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 460.

legacy.<sup>232</sup> That is to say, any metaphysical framework that connects ethics with the intellectual comprehension of reality as a teleological order is prone to label certain identities as “intrinsically evil” and deny the radical contingency of moral beliefs.<sup>233</sup> This, Connolly believes, could lead to aggressive nationalism and arbitrary political violence. He seems convinced that these kinds of metaphysical beliefs are just as problematic as the different forms of violent nationalism that he criticizes.

Thus, in a neo-Nietzschean fashion, he prefers to ground ethics in a visceral embrace of life and the protean possibilities a world of becoming offers. Connolly clearly finds the visceral register of faith to be more fundamental than the intellectual dimension. This prioritization of human desire over the intellect, however, has serious consequences. As Johnson points out, it is not always easy to make out what Connolly means by “life.” It is safe to assume that life includes the maximization of different ways of life and the contingent faiths that might give shape to it.<sup>234</sup> This leads Connolly to criticize forms of religiosity and totalizing ideologies, such as neoliberalism, that might either limit life’s myriad expressions or bring it to a premature end. However, he seems to not have a problem with abortion and euthanasia and considers these acts—which are considered anti-life by many Christians—as expressions of life.<sup>235</sup>

One wonders whether the indeterminacy of Connolly’s conception of life is related to his ethics of sentiment and rejection of teleology. If the intellectual comprehension of the world—through metaphysical narratives—cannot provide an ethicist with an understanding of the normative shape of life or desire, then how one defines the life that one embraces is necessarily

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<sup>232</sup> William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

<sup>233</sup> Connolly, xii.

<sup>234</sup> Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 133.

<sup>235</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 37; 134.

arbitrary. This means that if Connolly seeks to provide a more definitive account of what life means for him, it would necessarily call into question his confidence that an ethics built on human sentiment alone can cross confessional boundaries better than liberalism.

Defining life would call his position into question for many reasons. Indeed, it would show that his understanding of life is quite exclusive of traditions that are different from his own and so reveal that his pluralism, like liberalism, necessarily draws a boundary of reasonable toleration and does so in the name of tolerance. To affirm a conception of life, even a minimalist one, would mean to partially shut off this ethos of pluralization and to bring premature closure to his political ethics. This is why Charles Mathewes argues that agonists are still engaged in the business of conflict “containment” like the liberals they criticize.<sup>236</sup> Of course, Connolly is well aware that his position will be exclusive of some people. His call to “militant” action reveals at least this much.<sup>237</sup> However, his criticism of other nationalists, liberal or conservative, is partly based on the premise that his position is far less arbitrary and exclusive than the alternatives. So, Connolly’s thin account of the good might not be thin after all. This problem bleeds into other areas of his political project.

The circle of inclusion that Connolly draws is not necessarily larger than that of liberalism, because it still implicitly prioritizes his conception of the good over that of others: Christians should not fight to ban euthanasia, for instance, because it conflicts with his conception of life’s bountiful pluralism. Yet, Connolly acknowledges that of his own position is contestable. However, if he makes his implicit ethics of life contestable, the boundary of his conception of pluralism would destabilize. In fact, it is not clear what taking one’s own moral commitments to

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<sup>236</sup> Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 272.

<sup>237</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 146.



be contestable would mean when facing incommensurably of such pressing magnitude.

Connolly's account of beliefs treats serious moral commitments too lightly, except this own.

While Connolly might consider Augustinian Christians "evil" for seeing certain acts as "intrinsically evil" based on a metaphysical teleology and so deserving of legal action, Augustinians might call Connolly anti-life for promoting abortion rights. So, from the Augustinian perspective, it is Connolly who is undermining the bounty of life for being inclusive of those who would undermine it. At this point, it should be clear that on Connolly's own terms, his conception of life is relative to those that he criticizes. He and his opponents would then be separated, not by rival truth claims, which could, at least in principle, be addressed by discourse, but rival sentiments, which cannot be subjected to rational criticism.

Ironically, this means that Connolly would have no reason to change his mind on ethical issues unless it is a change in the vision of life to which he is viscerally attached. Political dialogue, then, could only sharpen existing divisions, rather than finding a new common conception of the good: a goal Connolly would reject as identitarian or totalitarian. In this case, one might consider whether the commitment to a set of transcendent norms might provide better political results. As Rowan Williams argues, it is only by faith or trust in an eschatological "community of universal *recognition*" that one has reasons to hope that communication across differences is possible and could lead to the suspension of the narrow group interests.<sup>238</sup> Unlike Connolly's more theologically inclined interlocutors, Connolly cannot argue that his position is morally preferable or even convert to a better position based on argument, because, on his view,

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<sup>238</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012), 122–23. Emphasis in original. This issue will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

there are no morally superior desires or ethical stances, just a plurality of desires and stances confronting one another.

The problem is, then, that on Connolly's philosophical standpoint, his view of life is no less arbitrary than that of his opponents. If norms emerge from desires apart from the intellectual recognition of proper ends, then it is impossible to critique desires rationally. So, unless Christians, Muslim, Jews, and Hindus are willing to embrace Connolly's vision of life, they could not accept with Connolly's political program. In fact, in Connolly's position, they would be considered undesirable citizens, because of their tendency to view their understanding of life to be truer than that of others. This part of his thought makes one doubt whether his politics is finally separable from his metaphysics. Unless one accepts his metaphysics of becoming, there would be no reason to consider all metaphysical positions as more or less equally contestable.<sup>239</sup> Connolly's pluralism is finally grounded in a fundamental exclusion that he is not able to justify and so it is hard to see how it might challenge the violent nationalisms that he criticizes. Absent better ends, why not embrace nationalism as an end in itself?

These considerations undermine Connolly's ability to deal with the problems raised in the last chapter. As discussed, human beings necessarily inherit a world of signs that give shape to their desires. It not only cultivates their desires, but it also teaches them what they *should* desire. In Western political imaginary, the nation-state can serve as the ultimate organizer of human meaning. The nation not only cultivates the sentiment of its citizens, but as Renan rightly points out, it tells them a story that gives shape to their ethical lives. In other words, it makes them feel

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<sup>239</sup> In fact, since there are no objective criteria—leaving aside the epistemological question of whether we can come to know these objective criteria—with which different positions can be judged, it is hard to make out if any ethical position is finally contestable. Rather, the word that is probably more fitting for Connolly's account is arbitrary.

that they belong to a story that is larger than themselves and theirs to protect. This story is what enables citizens to make sacrifices to secure the existence of the political order and, by virtue of doing so, secure the eternal significance of their lives. The problem of security then makes survival the ultimate end of every political project. The only way to challenge such a narrative, then, is to unsettle it with another world of signs that calls the faith and loyalty of the citizens in to question.

It is important to recall that the stories that nation-states tell are not seen as contingent stories, but stories of ultimate significance or at least significant enough to demand sacrifices. This problem is exacerbated, as Connolly points out, given that there are always multiple narratives contending for recognition within the same political territory. Thus, Connolly's radical pluralist citizen faces an insurmountable difficulty. Metaphysically speaking, the pluralist turns out to be a person who stands behind every system of meaning, with an empty desire that could be attached to any ethical shell. This might not be how Connolly would characterize his metaphysics. However, it is this transcendental horizon of the self behind culture that could relativize all ethical positions.

Unlike the political subject in Kahn's phenomenology, Connolly's does not fully inhabit any particular sphere of meaning that gives shape to human desire. His political subject is, rather, one who happens to feel a certain way about a way of life that he cannot finally justify and thus criticize. One should, of course, agree that reason is not everything and that moral argumentation has its limits. Still, this aspect of Connolly's pluralism makes it impossible to criticize identitarian politics on ethical grounds, because ethics is finally only a matter of desire. If this is so, then, at best, identitarian or nationalistic politics are merely undesirable. He can provide no reason for identitarian to "work on" the visceral dimensions of their lives to shift their loyalties.

In other words, even if one accepts that desires have priority over the intellect, alternative metaethics would still be necessary to render desires morally contestable.

Furthermore, Connolly hopes that the same radical pluralist would embrace life as Connolly sees it—that is, an alternative system of meaning—and be prepared to defend it against its identitarian enemies militantly. As previously discussed, Connolly’s politics is not necessarily less exclusive than some of his rivals. A pluralist has her own enemies and evils to battle, namely identitarians. When pluralists are so threatened, would they be willing to suspend their highest ideals when confronted by the enemies of pluralism? As Johnson points out, citing Žižek, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, “outside of elite intellectual circles, increased hybridity, mobility, and contingency, are often experienced traumatically and associated with increased suffering.”<sup>240</sup> If Connolly’s pluralist conception of life is powerful enough to garner faith, loyalty, and devotion, then it must also face the problem of survival. However, unlike liberalism, Connolly’s metaphysics denies the possibility of transcendent ends. So, the struggle to survive is all the more urgent.

It is difficult to answer this question because it is not at all clear that Connolly’s pluralism can foster the kind of solidarity and loyalty that nationalism does. As we have seen, without some determinate common end that mediates human solidarity, there can be no political community. Without the promise of lasting meaning, there could be no political passion. What Connolly provides is not a narrative that could discipline human desire, because it is itself grounded on a nihilistic account of desire. Kahn, as has been shown, does not separate the intellect from desire, even as he prioritizes the will. The will cannot exist in a vacuum. Faith, loyalty, devotion are the substances of politics and they require the sacred.

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<sup>240</sup> Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 139.

It is Romand Coles' recognition of the embeddedness of ethical reflection that drives him to resource different religious and moral traditions for an agonist account of politics, not unlike that of Connolly. It is to his account of political ethics that the next few section are devoted.

## VI. Romand Coles' Critique of Political Teleology

In *Beyond Gated Politics*, Romand Coles challenges liberalism and provides an alternative approach to politics based on building trans-confessional relationships of receptivity. Like Connolly, Coles moves comfortably between religious and political traditions and intentionally engages with them. Coles is unique in that he lets these other traditions broaden his own understanding of what he calls the teleological—or goal-oriented—dimensions as well as the ateleological—or the dialogical—dimensions of political life.<sup>241</sup> In his writing, Cole seeks to demonstrate how he is both unsettled and enriched by the traditions with which he engages. This is why he includes, in his political writings, Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder alongside figures such as Jacque Derrida and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Cole's model of "radical" democratic engagement emerges within a context of the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of "transnational corporate and financial power, myriad fundamentalisms, neofascist megastates, gargantuan media conglomerates, ruthless neocolonial power, bloody state and nonstate terrorism, and environmental catastrophe."<sup>242</sup> With Connolly, Coles wish to resist the concentrated forms of political solidarity, whether it be in the nation-state or other religious or economic institutions.

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<sup>241</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xv.

<sup>242</sup> Coles, ix.

Thus, he feels that new ways of conceptualizing democratic politics are necessary in order to combat forces of disempowerment that threaten democracy.

Coles thinks current liberal models of democracy are inadequate because they cannot successfully foster a receptively generous democratic ethos: an ethos capable of building democratic associations and coalitions beyond the confines of public reason. According to him, liberalism at best unintentionally reinforces existing configurations of power by excluding important sources of resistance. Liberalism does so partly by refusing to acknowledge the contingency of the theoretical boundaries that it erects in order to preserve the integrity of public discourse.

Yet, Cole's attitude toward liberalism is not one of dismissal. He does detect, in liberalism, an admirable sense of the tragic dimensions of politics. Coles defines this tragic sensibility as the stretching of

“listeners between the calls to the importance of articulating, mediating, and striving toward the highest values of a community, on the one hand, and painful evocations of the unacknowledged suffering often wrought by a community's ideals ... and the inextinguishable need to be transformed through receptive engagements with those a community marginalizes and subjugates, on the other.”<sup>243</sup>

In other words, the fundamental spirit of liberalism is a real sense of the tragic finitude of all human political projects and traditions. Liberalism as a political project begins by rightly recognizing that violence and blindness is a necessary part of democratic engagement, especially in societies marked by cultural and religious diversity. Coles is, therefore, in this sense, still a political liberal.

However, Cole believes liberalism takes this recognition in too self-congratulatory a manner. He worries that this apparent humility at the core of liberalism can and does easily turn

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<sup>243</sup> Coles, 2.

into its opposite, a “self-assurance” that is “entwined with an insistence that political liberalism is ‘above the political fray.’”<sup>244</sup> In other words, liberalism’s recognition of tragedy is often taken to mean that liberalism is more “capacious” and more self-aware than other political alternatives.<sup>245</sup> This sense of liberal superiority then is leveraged to justify the imposition of liberal limits on all political discourse.<sup>246</sup> Liberal self-assurance, then, impedes liberalism’s ability to be critical of its own moral and theoretical assumptions.<sup>247</sup>

This same self-assurance also disqualifies other political visions that might help to deepen democracy and help resist hegemonic forms of power that seek to undermine it. For instance, John Rawls’ attempt to bar “comprehensive doctrines” with his (ever-evolving) theoretical articulation of a “public reason” seems to disqualify other political visions without acknowledging the contingency of public reason itself.<sup>248</sup> Coles believes a narrowly defined regime of public reason might, for example, exclude resources from religious traditions (such as paganism and Christian theism) that challenge the anthropocentrism of modernity and advances a

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<sup>244</sup> Coles, 2.

<sup>245</sup> Coles, 7.

<sup>246</sup> Coles, 12.

<sup>247</sup> Coles, 9. According to Coles, Rawls does not argue that the peace of liberalism is the result of the exclusions of public reason. Rather, he merely assumes it. Whenever Rawls responds to his potential critics on this point, he “conjures” up the specter of religious violence in order to buttress the idea that liberalism is the solution of conflicting “comprehensive doctrines.” It is unclear how far Cole’s critique of public reason goes as he would probably find appeals to God and Christianity in invading Iraq, for instance, disagreeable. The reason might be that this political decision does not show proper respect for a pluralistic population who believe in liberal values.

<sup>248</sup> Rawls acknowledges that his view of public reason shifted from an exclusive view to an inclusive view. Nonetheless, Coles believes his more inclusive articulation of public reason is still limited to comprehensive doctrines that could be used to support the regime of public reason itself. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 247.

more ecologically conscious economics.<sup>249</sup> All the while, as Coles argues, many political liberals are willing to tolerate “vast economic inequalities” and environmental degradation in order to “improve the condition of the least well-off.” In other words, liberals fail to acknowledge that their own view of equality and fairness and their application of the difference principle are already heavily inflected by the power relations of capitalism and modern anthropocentrism.<sup>250</sup>

Coles believes that liberalism cements structures of power and ideologies that undermine the ability of democracy to address the challenges posed by neo-liberal globalization and the consolidation of corporate power. When liberalism thus conceived is translated to the international realm as a normative project of globalization, Coles thinks that it has dangerous neo-colonial tendencies. Coles points out the fact that liberal thinkers often extend the logic of economic currency into political discourse is quite revealing. In the international market place, a common currency becomes effective only insofar as there is a general consent that there are commodities that could be exchanged as equivalents. While this is extremely useful and beneficial, the market logic of economic equivalency can become detrimental if it infiltrates and replaces other non-economic relationships or models of valuation.<sup>251</sup>

Currency, therefore, has the effect of making things equivalent in order to service dominant economic relationships in capitalism. Similarly, the common currency of liberal public reason in the international realm can shut out differences that are not easily contained by it. So, for Coles, despite their best intentions, efforts by liberals like Rawls and Martha Nussbaum to

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<sup>249</sup> Although it is not clear how exactly public reason does this since it is designed for political purposes (i.e., actions of the government that affects the entire population), not activism in civil society.

<sup>250</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 4.

<sup>251</sup> Coles, 51–52.



construct a global ethics risk doing violence to the alterity of different cultures.<sup>252</sup> Coles' problem with traditional liberalism is therefore two-fold. First, liberalism is ill-equipped to engage with traditions that radically calls itself into question and so preempts the chance to develop better critique and coalitions against the powers that be. Second, liberalism shuts out expression or "cries" against injustice that are made possible by alternative comprehensive doctrines, such as the challenges posed by ecological theologies that are not anthropocentric.<sup>253</sup> That is, liberalism forecloses the possibility that there might be politically more urgent tasks than the maintenance of consensus or widespread agreement for the sake of peace.<sup>254</sup>

Coles calls liberalism into question by showing that the particular expression of liberal capaciousness is itself contingent and should be subjected to interrogation by liberalism's others.<sup>255</sup> Yet, his critical attitude should not be taken in isolation from his desire to articulate a deeper democracy for the sake of equality and fairness. It is clear then that Coles is not merely interested in criticizing liberalism. His motivation is unabashedly political: to develop a deeper democracy capable of challenging injustice through better political imaginations.

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<sup>252</sup> Coles, 63–64; Martha C. Nussbaum, "A Plea for Difficulty," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with Respondents*, ed. Matthew Howard Joshua Cohen and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 105–14. Nussbaum is, of course, aware of the tensions between ethical universalism and necessity to respect difference. This is inevitable should anyone have moral values. Nussbaum defends her position compellingly.

<sup>253</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 12.

<sup>254</sup> Coles believes that liberalism is primarily driven by a fear of conflict and chaos. In other words, there exist in liberalism a fundamental denial that conflicts outside the confines of liberalism can be generative or productive. Coles, 25.

<sup>255</sup> Coles, 20.

## VII. Coles on the Value of Tradition

The limits of liberal public reason send Coles on a journey to engage with political traditions that he believes is more aware of their own contingency and contestability. This leads Coles to both critical and appreciative reading of MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian ethics. He observes that one of MacIntyre's most valuable insights is that liberal politics disguises fundamental differences. The rhetoric of neutral "consensus" has dulled the ability to trace moral beliefs back to their contestable sources.<sup>256</sup> So liberal peace is won at the cost of the possibility of coherent moral discourse.<sup>257</sup> As one who is attentive to the tradition-specific nature of moral discourse, Coles thinks MacIntyre is far more aware of the contingency of human rationality.

MacIntyre proposes that the way forward is in recovering the Aristotelian mode of moral inquiry, which is oriented towards the discovery of what the good life is. So, according to Coles, MacIntyre is not nostalgic about ancient Athens. Rather, for Coles, MacIntyre is fully postmodern in that he does not define the good in a reified way, using self-evident first principles: MacIntyre's tradition is "a mode of emergence—or better, of emerging."<sup>258</sup> Coles does not believe, as many critics of MacIntyre do, that MacIntyre imagines that a completely transparent or homogenous community is possible or desirable. Rather, a community organized around a particular vision of the good is "the ever-distant telos of a tradition's unending 'quest.'"<sup>259</sup> Coles explains that for MacIntyre the success of an ethical tradition is measured by its ability to accommodate and transcend ethical conflicts of the past. The new ethical position or

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<sup>256</sup> Coles, 81.

<sup>257</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 75–92.

<sup>258</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 85.

<sup>259</sup> Coles, 84.

tradition we espouse, then, is no more than a conditionally “justifiable” position or traditional that could, in principle, be superseded by a new alternative in the future.<sup>260</sup>

For Coles, MacIntyre’s ethical project sees conflict as a positive thing rather than, as in liberalism, something to be either downplayed or suppressed. Dialogical conflict, for MacIntyre, must be propelled forward by a “unifying project of striving to bring coherence to diverse goods, practices, and virtues.”<sup>261</sup> Without this overarching telos, MacIntyre argues, rational moral discourse becomes impossible. At the same time, the shape and precise content of this telos could only be a result of this agonistic rational discourse. Coles believes MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition allows one to see dissent from the current consensus of Aristotelian moral inquiry not as a sign of weakness of the tradition, but crucial for the continued justifiability of the traditional itself.<sup>262</sup> His is appreciative that MacIntyre’s vision of the good life is always ahead of moral discourse itself. There is a sense in which the completion of the moral life is situated in a future utopia that can never exist in the present in its fullness.

Still, Coles is critical of MacIntyre, because he seems to place too much confidence in the truth of a tradition that supposedly recognizes its vulnerabilities and contingency and excels at dealing with challenges in the past: “a tradition’s growing confidence diminishes its sense of the significance of the distance between itself and the good toward which it aims.”<sup>263</sup> In this way, MacIntyre’s recognition of his Thomism’s vulnerability is transformed into an ideological prop for the tradition that he espouses, much in the same way that liberalism’s supposed

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<sup>260</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 346–47. Milbank likewise detects a Hegelian flavor to MacIntyre’s dialectical method but rejects it as being incompatible with classical Christianity.

<sup>261</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 90.

<sup>262</sup> Coles, 93.

<sup>263</sup> Coles, 101.

capaciousness serves to justify its hegemony.<sup>264</sup> Coles thinks it is this confidence that explains why MacIntyre sometimes supports institutionalized exclusions of radical dissent in order to protect the integrity of the discourse itself. Coles claims that MacIntyre's tendency to see "otherness" as a threat—as in examples of moral communities like that of deep-sea fishers—betrays a problematic defensive attitude that could render MacIntyre's defense of tradition invulnerable to contestation. This leads Coles to search for traditions that navigates the tension between teleology and ateleology than MacIntyre. He finds this in Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

#### VIII. Coles on Yoder's Vulnerable Christian Faith

John Howard Yoder's Christian ethics of dialogical engagement strikes Coles as an intriguing attempt to balance one's commitment to a "confessional" tradition as well as a receptive generosity toward others. Far from being a sectarian, Coles thinks Yoder provides promising resources that could enrich democratic engagement. Partly, this is due to Yoder's ability to show that the uniqueness of the church is constituted by its vulnerable engagement with others. Unlike liberalism and MacIntyre's Thomism, Yoder does not fold this vulnerability back to justify the superiority of Christianity. Coles asserts that with Deleuzians, Yoder resists an "arboreal imagination."<sup>265</sup> So, from Coles' perspective, the vulnerability of Yoder's model is more genuine: like other Christians, Yoder privileges the church epistemically as being different

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<sup>264</sup> Coles, 102. Coles suggests that we develop "a studied asceticism toward the seductive confidence boosters that accompany the growth of systems."

<sup>265</sup> Romand Coles, "Democracy, Theology, and the Question of Excess: A Review of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," *Modern Theology* 21, no. 2 (April 2005): 315.

and distance from the world, “but he understands this distance as the church’s condition for engaging with the world generously and with receptive vulnerability.”<sup>266</sup>

Coles argues that any community that confesses that “Jesus is Lord” might seem to necessarily lead to epistemic and dialogical closures. Yet, Yoder’s vision shows that confessing that Jesus is Lord cannot be separated from the ethics of vulnerability that Jesus embodied. This claim, Coles insists, also cannot be separated from the ecclesial practice of reaching back to the early church’s encounters with Jesus Christ through scripture.<sup>267</sup> Since this process of reaching back to revelation in order to bring the present to accountability is never finished or complete, there is a lot of room for the church to commit errors. In addition, even if the church could access the earliest memory of Jesus, Yoder recognizes that this memory itself is already a reaching back or an interpretation of the original encounter. So, the witness of the early church is itself an interpretation. Coles explains that for Yoder, “truth is always a finite historical incarnation.”<sup>268</sup> What is enduring is not necessarily the conclusion of discernment, but a set of practices of vulnerable engagement with one another as well as the community that embodies these practices. Unlike liberalism’s model of discourse, the church is not held together by a set of agreed-upon foundation, but by “a dialogical process of reconciliation.”<sup>269</sup>

Coles argues that this dialogical orientation within the church is also not closed to people who are outside of the church. In fact, for Yoder, the church inhabits the border between the church and the world. The church’s reaching back to its root is impossible without a vulnerable engagement with others because the identity of the church is constituted by encounters with

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<sup>266</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 112.

<sup>267</sup> Coles, 116.

<sup>268</sup> Coles, 116.

<sup>269</sup> Coles, 117.

strangers. By closing itself to others, the church is also closing itself to new prophetic criticism and the possibility that Jesus may be present in ways that it could not be imagined before. Therefore Yoder's church, for Coles, should always be open to be interrupted and reconfigured by such engagements.<sup>270</sup> According to him, Yoder sees the recent renewal of nonviolence resistance and liberation theologies are heavily indebted to the effort of non-Christians to bring to attention elements of their own tradition that they had forgotten or marginalized.<sup>271</sup> For Coles, it is impossible to understand Yoder's Christian Gospel apart from vulnerable and loving encounters with strangers.<sup>272</sup>

Coles shows that receptive engagement with others is internally related to Yoder's faith. To claim Jesus' lordship is to resist the idols of power and wealth—the things that make receptive generosity impossible.<sup>273</sup> The gift of Christianity to democratic discourse is, therefore, receptive patience. Yet, Coles is concerned that intrinsic to Yoder's ethics of engagement is a jealous God who tolerates nothing but the ultimate submission of all things to him. He acknowledges that Christian eschatology does not need to be interpreted in this violent way. He also realizes that the rhetoric of monotheistic jealousy is powerful when wielded against the “odious forms of power,” such as the power of neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>274</sup> Still, Coles is suspicious of Yoder's Christian convictions, which might “engender an overwhelming hubris in believers, a hubris that could vitiate the very receptivity he [Yoder] otherwise cultivates.”<sup>275</sup> He sees Yoder's faith as possibly

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<sup>270</sup> Coles, “Democracy, Theology, and the Question of Excess: A Review of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*,” 316.

<sup>271</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 122.

<sup>272</sup> Coles, 125.

<sup>273</sup> Coles, 130.

<sup>274</sup> Coles, 138.

<sup>275</sup> Coles, 131.

pushing against the more rhizomatic dimensions of his thought.<sup>276</sup> Despite Yoder's careful attempt to negotiate the liminal boundary between confession and vulnerability, Coles asks whether Christianity eschatological monotheism is intrinsically related to the constantinian attitude.<sup>277</sup> In the end, Coles is worried that Christianity might not be easily disentangled from the powers that it resists.

This perceived weakness in both Yoder and MacIntyre is why Coles appreciates Nietzsche, who—far from offering a metaphysics of the “will to power”—dons different epistemic masks in order to reveal the folly of every attempt to seek the absolute truth.<sup>278</sup> Coles agrees with MacIntyre that certain interpretations of Nietzscheism are probably inimical to the search for truth.<sup>279</sup> He is also open to MacIntyre's charge that Nietzschean perspectivism cannot be sustained in practice without “inconsistencies.”<sup>280</sup> Nonetheless, Coles sees in Nietzsche and the larger genealogical tradition of Foucault a better recognition of the contingency of all discourses and suspects that the tension present in the genealogical tradition is not, in fact, vital to the quest for truth.

## IX. Coles' Ethic of Nepantlist Generosity

One thing that is clear to Coles is that a new model of politics can be achieved only in the liminal space between teleology and ateleology. “I seek a democratic ethos,” he writes, “that

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<sup>276</sup> Coles' concerns resurface in his conversation with Stanley Hauerwas. There, Coles is concerned about “metanarratives that become an escape from seeing the specificity before us; metanarratives that impose their orders to secure their threatened isolation.” Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radically Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), 341.

<sup>277</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 133.

<sup>278</sup> Coles, 171.

<sup>279</sup> Coles, 172–73.

<sup>280</sup> Coles, 173.

cultivates tension-dwelling as a most promising mode of exercising judgment and engaging in democratic action.”<sup>281</sup> By teleology, he means that politics is always animated by a particular vision of the good derived from a tradition of ethical/political thought or practice. As such, politics always passing on and critically retrieves the wisdom handed down by a specific historical conversation. Politics is also teleological because it is goal oriented. However, Coles asserts that traditions are always finite expressions of human understanding and so in addition to wisdom, traditions also carry blind spots and exclusionary elements.<sup>282</sup> This is not simply due to human finitude, but the fact that traditions are always developed within configurations of power that “overdetermine” their development.<sup>283</sup> Therefore, traditions are always in need of a receptive engagement with other traditions.

In place of the standard liberal model of political engagement according to public reason, Coles proposes what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “nepantilism,” which Coles reframes as nepantlist generosity.<sup>284</sup> Nepantlist generosity entails the intentional inhabitation of “multiple borderlands” of identities and traditions.<sup>285</sup> The reason for this tensional existence is not simply that most human beings naturally belong to multiple communities or that identity is by nature porous. To dwell at the borderlands is to acknowledge that life is too complex for any one tradition to handle. So, the blindness of one tradition is always in need of tensional enrichment by engaging with others. This engagement, Cole asserts, requires a sense of the need to “listen attentively to the voices and visions that come from places it cannot or has not yet illuminated.”<sup>286</sup> He,

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<sup>281</sup> Coles, xiii.

<sup>282</sup> Coles, xiv.

<sup>283</sup> Coles, xv.

<sup>284</sup> Anzaldúa Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 2012), 78–79.

<sup>285</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 66.

<sup>286</sup> Coles, 66.



therefore, admires the way feminists of color generate multiple “visions of the good ... in response to the problems and possibilities of their particular histories.”<sup>287</sup>

Coles believes nepantlist generosity is also a promising way to move beyond the twin dangers of aggressive nationalism and identitarian politics.<sup>288</sup> Dwelling in the liminal space of multiple traditions allows one to see that there is no “bedrock” currency that could ultimately make sense of difference.<sup>289</sup> Politics, for Coles, is about the persistent movement of deconstruction and reconstruction.<sup>290</sup> He believes that this movement could cultivate solidarities and connections that transcend any rigid understanding of sovereignty or authority. If the human body is always already inscribed by multiple meanings and traditions, then no system of meaning can claim final authority. Rather, what is constant in the political experience of the one who inhabits the borderlands is a movement forward toward a political destination that is not fully defined by the past. Thus, Coles acknowledges that radical democracy is a risky and often painful endeavor. Yet, at the same time, it fosters “generative” possibilities.”<sup>291</sup>

For Coles, nepantlist generosity is a more promising cosmopolitan ethics, precisely because it is not interested in establishing a unitary dialogical currency that equalizes all traditions. Instead, it is focused on building a more just world from the ground up, through the difficult work of engaging in immanent criticisms of multiple traditions. This new ethics resembles Walter Mignolo’s decolonial model of “border thinking,” which seeks to develop a new cosmopolitan vision confronting the hegemonic model of Western globalization that often

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<sup>287</sup> Coles, 187.

<sup>288</sup> Coles, 188.

<sup>289</sup> Coles, 194.

<sup>290</sup> Coles, 194.

<sup>291</sup> Coles, 193.

silences local traditions.<sup>292</sup> The point of nepantlist generosity and border thinking is to make a home where home is out of reach. It is to learn the habits to be able to dwell in a place where one is never overly committed to one way of thinking to the absolute exclusion of others. Nepantlist generosity, then, incarnates the space between teleology and ateleology. Coles' task of situating politics between teleology and ateleology allows him to be both critical of traditions that are unreflective as well as traditions that are purely deconstructive.<sup>293</sup>

#### X. Coles' Ethic of Life

It is clear that Coles' primary objection to any political/ethical tradition is its failure to recognize its limitations and historical contingency. However, the tragic taken in itself surely cannot ground a political ethics. Coles himself recognizes this when he criticizes fellow agonists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, for failing to articulate the basis of solidarity.<sup>294</sup> Given the often painful process of negotiating differences and multiple identities, Coles believes that agonists cannot simply assume that people would naturally remain in the borderlands without either retreating to one's comfortable environment or returning to the politics of exclusion, thus dissolving ateleology. An ethics of receptive generosity must, therefore, be grounded in a deeper narrative of why solidarity across differences is not only politically necessary but "desirable."<sup>295</sup>

Coles' ethics of receptive generosity is tethered to a deep recognition of the tragic dimensions of human existence. However, there is still a strongly teleological dimension in his

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<sup>292</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>293</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 139–84.

<sup>294</sup> Romand Coles, "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity: Neo-Nietzschean Reflections on the Ethics and Politics of Coalition.," *American Journal Science Review* 90, no. 2 (June 1996): 6.

<sup>295</sup> Coles, 8.

political project. This dimension colors Cole's ateleological engagements with other traditions, but is seldom brought to the fore, possibly because Coles does not wish for it to undermine his engagement with lines of thinking that are other than his own. This attitude, of course, is in keeping with his own practice of straddling between teleology and ateleology. It also obscures his fundamental assumptions and shelters it from being critically assessed, even while he questions the confessional elements of other traditions, such as Yoder's Christianity.

Coles grounds his democratic ethos in what could be called an "ethics of life." This fundamental teleology is, ironically, grounded in the profoundly anti-teleological thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche. Coles admits that Nietzsche could not be considered a radical democrat or egalitarian or that Nietzschean thought taken as a whole can be bent to serve the cause of radical democracy. Yet, he thinks Nietzsche offers some resources to develop an ethics of receptive generosity. Coles finds them in his careful reading of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Coles argues, Nietzsche attempts to give an account of gift giving as the highest virtue in a world where God is dead. Taking inspiration from the "Sun" that gives "all beings being and perceptivity," Nietzsche sees gift-giving as the most admirable virtue in that it is not polluted by what he perceives to be problematic expressions of the "will to power."<sup>296</sup> This giving self, Coles argues, is the radicalization of the modern turn to the subject, initiated by René Descartes and developed by Immanuel Kant.<sup>297</sup> However, as Zarathustra attempts to share its own novel values and meanings with others, Coles points out, a problem presents itself: the autonomous and heroic giving self is unable to share with others what they

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<sup>296</sup> Coles, 10.

<sup>297</sup> Coles picks Nietzsche as his inspiration because he embodies the limits of the Enlightenment turn towards the subject as well as its opening toward self-criticism. Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 8–15.

refuse to receive. So, the goals of the autonomous gift-giving self are thwarted by the same people from whom he refuses to receive. This leads Zarathustra to bitterly blame his enemies, rather than his non-receptivity, for undermining his gift giving. The gift giver has nothing of value to give unless he is aware of the needs and values of those to whom he wishes to give. Therefore, Coles sees in this turn of events an opening, in Nietzsche's thought, toward receptive generosity.

Coles argues that Zarathustra's incapability to give is intrinsically related to his unwillingness to receive. Zarathustra's failure to give demonstrates the blindness of one who does not listen.<sup>298</sup> This blindness causes him to become bitter and exhausted. Coles concludes that Nietzsche's unreceptive and heroic giving self is self-contradictory: "this unreceptive effort is not only tiring in an unhelpful manner to the supposed recipients but also tends to tire of itself. In learning nothing from one's encounters, one remains untransfigured and untransfiguring."<sup>299</sup> This realization leads Coles to reconfigure Nietzsche's "doctrine of eternal return" as an opening towards an ethics of receptive generosity.<sup>300</sup> Coles reads eternal return as the tragic sense that "one cannot escape the smallest in others and oneself; one cannot simply will it away any more than one can will away the past."<sup>301</sup> Human subject is thus haunted by a past that it is not responsible for.

For Coles, this tragic sensibility of time is what challenges the sovereignty of the human subject. He insists that the best way to cope with the eternal return without undermining the subject's ability to give generously is to open oneself to the "partly agonistic, partly cooperative,

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<sup>298</sup> Coles, "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity," 12.

<sup>299</sup> Coles, 13.

<sup>300</sup> Coles, 13–14.

<sup>301</sup> Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 114.

always transfiguring dialogical effort with others to discern” the shape of the flourishing human life, which entails the discernment of what is higher and lower in human life.<sup>302</sup> In other words, in a world where everything is radically contingent, the only way to still retain a sense of direction and hope is by opening oneself up to radical receptivity. This receptivity is, for Coles, the condition of human well-being: receptive generosity is the “oblique path of ascension” in a world without God.<sup>303</sup> Later on, Coles further elaborates this ethics of generosity by resourcing Theodore Adorno’s negative dialectics, which, unlike Nietzsche’s thinking, still retains some hope that truth will emerge from the radical questioning of the status quo.<sup>304</sup>

#### XI. The Limits of Coles’ Generosity

Cole’s political ethics is marked by a compelling dose of generosity and humility. His willingness to engage with traditions other than his own and learn from them models the radical receptivity that he wishes to cultivate in his readers. More importantly, Coles is sensitive to the limited place of liberalism. Like MacIntyre, Coles believes vulnerable conversations and confrontations can sustain democratic politics. However, the ungenerous centripetal force of nationalism, identity, and the liberal desires to define and police the boundaries of political discourse undermine these types of conversations and the virtue of generosity necessary to sustain it.

Running underneath Cole’s writings is, as Paul W. Kahn, a sensitivity for the existential dimension of politics. Politics is, for Coles, clearly an arena where different visions of the good are forced to confront one another. Unlike political liberals, Coles recognizes that political

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<sup>302</sup> Coles, “Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity,” 15.

<sup>303</sup> Coles, 15; Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 134–37.

<sup>304</sup> Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 75–134.

discourse cannot and should not be separated from the underlying narratives and traditions—in other words, “comprehensive doctrines”—that give intelligibility and life. This is why he finds thinkers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter Mignolo, and John Howard Yoder helpful. His political ethics is, therefore, designed to enable democratic citizens to engage in conversations about ultimate concerns. Coles is aware that politics is a battleground of contested loyalties and commitment. So, in order for a politics of radical receptivity to work, an underlying ethical narrative is necessary to cultivate and make sense of the virtues he seeks to promote. This is when Coles turned to Nietzsche—using him against himself—to construct a philosophical anthropology.

Coles’ unique reading of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the “eternal return,” for instance, is more hopeful than one would expect. The eternal return might be a useful regulative ideal in helping agonists stay attuned to the political or ethical alternatives that might emerge. However, unless a set of permanent values exist, there is no way to determine whether the new things that emerge from the chaotic soup of agonistic struggles would be “higher” or “lower” than the “old.” If this eternal return of the same is interpreted within a framework of radical immanence, thereby precluding the possibility of a metaphysics of transcendence—and it is hard to imagine Nietzsche’s eternal return otherwise—every moment would be, as David Bentley Hart argues, “that moment where election and rejection, affirmation and curse, are one of the same.”<sup>305</sup> A referent to something beyond the contingencies of time seems to be necessary in order to ground Coles’ ethics of radical generosity in a world where everything is radically contingent.

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<sup>305</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetic of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 271.

Cole's suspicion of the Christian convictions of Yoder is instructive. His main complaint against Yoder's faith is that it might breed a problematic aggressive "jealousy" that might lead to unreflective confidence and exclusions, which he attributes to monotheism as such. But as Coles insightfully asks, "Is there not a jealousy infusing and partly enabling every generosity; certain refusals, certain relatively rigid limits to any 'yes'?"<sup>306</sup> In addition, as he acknowledges, Yoder's patience and willingness to be radically vulnerable is grounded in his faith that Christ, as the telos of all human political struggles, is the God-man who embodies this openness to others.<sup>307</sup> Take away Yoder's faith in Christ, his entire ethical edifice collapses. Therefore, one rightly wonders whether the teleological dimensions of Coles' ethics can be sustained entirely without a notion of the transcendent.

This ambiguity of Coles leads one also to wonder whether his choice of Nietzsche, rather than Yoder, as the ultimate ally makes much sense. Coles acknowledges that the progression of Nietzsche's thought, in fact, pushes against the grain of radical democracy, with its commitment to egalitarianism and vulnerable generosity. This is no doubt due to Nietzsche's explicit

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<sup>306</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 138.

<sup>307</sup> Coles' suspicion of eschatology seems to not about eschatology as such, but a kind of eschatology that is "imagined as a mode of expressive being in space and time (space and time would finally pass beyond the vulnerable 'border at the core')." In other words, Coles is worried about a historical messianism that translates eschatological anticipation into historical pride. But as Yoder makes clear, the kingdom is not something human efforts can bring about but merely give witness too. Therefore, eschatology serves as much as a category of judgment that "the kingdoms of the world will pass away" as an assurance that death is not the last word of history. See Romand Coles, "The Pregnant Reticence of Rowan Williams: Letter of February 27, 2006, and May 2007," in *Christianity, Democracy and the Radically Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), 181.

affirmation of an ethics of the will to power, which lies behind even the generosity that Coles admires.<sup>308</sup> Coles still believes the way forward is to resource Nietzsche's philosophy.

Coles' earlier engagements with Nietzsche also reveals that underneath his radical democratic commitments is a radical admiration of life. However, as Ronald E. Osborn insightfully asks that "Nietzsche's text might be deconstructed and reconstructed in endless ways, including in the service of humanistic values ... the question arises: what is the purpose of the exercise?" What Osborn's question implies is that even if one rejects Nietzsche's celebration of the hyper-masculine will to power, there remains little in his thought beyond the radical questioning of all traditions and religious meta-narratives as props of institutionalized power. Once Nietzsche's perspectivism is affirmed, every attempt to bend Nietzsche in the service of liberal values would seem to reflect only the philosopher's personal biases and presupposes values. So, Coles is in the same predicament as Connolly.

Thus, Coles' selection of a very particular interpretation of generosity seems arbitrary within a neo-Nietzschean framework. Might not Coles' understanding of what is admirable about life be itself relativized as another attempt to impose meaning in an essentially meaningless world, devoid of an intrinsic telos?<sup>309</sup> Drawing from MacIntyre, Osborn wonders whether Nietzsche's glorification of the will to power is not "based upon his own nineteenth-century

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<sup>308</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemical Tract*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2009), 61; Beam Craig, "Hume and Nietzsche: Naturalists, Ethicists, Anti-Christians," *Hume Studies* 22, no. 2 (November 1996): 317.

<sup>309</sup> This is not a question that he dealt with sufficiently in his response to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, whatever the merits of his criticism. Romand Coles, "Storied Others and Possibilities of Caritas: Milbank and Neo-Nietzschean Ethics," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (1992): 331–51.



Romantic individualism.”<sup>310</sup> A stubborn affirmation of one particular interpretation of life does not seem able to do the work that Coles assigns to it: to foster solidarity across radical differences. It is not by any means clear that life is to be affirmed, unless there is something about life, which moves towards the fullness of being—in other words, something that is not reducible to the abstract affirmation of life.

Resourcing Adorno’s negative dialectics does not seem to address the problem. For Adorno, what the barbarism of modern totalitarianism reveals is that the Enlightenment itself is nothing more than a new myth—that is, a conceptual regime imposed on reality by the human subject to tame its otherness.<sup>311</sup> Every human attempt to conceptualize the world inevitably leaves out and does violence to the otherness that remains beyond the reach of reason—the same otherness that forces Kant to separate the noumenal from the phenomenal—that which cannot be conceptualized.<sup>312</sup> Adorno’s dialectical criticism of modernity is, therefore, oriented by an almost messianic anticipation that final reconciliation between mind and otherness that is never realizable.<sup>313</sup> He imagines a future “ineffable” utopia as a regulative ideal. At the same time, Adorno denies the reality of a teleological order where the myriad human ends can be reconciled with one another, however imperfectly. In fact, human reason can only recognize “the wrong state of things.”<sup>314</sup> This is necessarily because he, like agonists, accepts the central premise that the human subject and objective reality are opposed at a fundamental level. So, unlike Hegel’s

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<sup>310</sup> Ronald E. Osborn, *Humanism and the Death of God: Searching for the Good after Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 144.

<sup>311</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>312</sup> Adorno calls this otherness “nonidentity.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1973), 5.

<sup>313</sup> Adorno, 11; Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 247.

<sup>314</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

dialectics, Adorno's negative dialectics does not seem capable of providing a vision of the good life that could propel agonistic contestation any more than Nietzsche.

Lastly, like Connolly, Coles does not seem to apply his critique of epistemic confidence and exclusion to his own ethics of democratic receptivity. For instance, white supremacist and neo-liberal traditions are excluded a priori, because they are not "generous" traditions. Is this not just the same kind of exclusion that he finds in public reason? One suspects that this fear of exclusions comes from his framework's inability to maintain the normative dimensions of his politics. Naming his ethical closures would potentially render his position vulnerable to his own criticisms. Given the ambiguity of Nietzsche's legacy, it is hard to discern where Cole's normative commitments come from.

Coles does not seem to offer a compelling narrative that makes sense of his admirable commitment to the excluded and suffering. It remains to be seen what shelters his commitment to radical democracy from being challenged and unsettled by nondemocratic traditions or something like white nationalism. Would his framework be so generous to the point of being open to being unsettled by these alternative traditions? If not, then how does not he fall prey to the charges of epistemic hubris he levels against MacIntyre and Yoder? He does not answer either question.

His commitment to a particular telos—a democratic community that is generous and vulnerable—is worth juxtaposing with the tradition that he criticizes. Although Coles is critical of the epistemic closures of MacIntyre's Thomist-Aristotelianism, his own political ethics is in a lot of ways profoundly Aristotelian. For instance, while engaging with Anzaldúa's model of "nepantlist generosity," he argues that new political wisdom must be found "between ways of being that deepen our sense of suffering, danger, and other possibilities for justice and

flourishing.”<sup>315</sup> Cole’s project of showing the contingency and fragility of all human political discourse is motivated by the hope that greater human flourishing can be found in such engagements. Yet, he eschews a teleological metaphysics, because of its perceived exclusionary potential and this is the greatest weakness of his project.

## XII. Conclusion

Connolly and Coles provide two compelling frameworks for democratic struggles against the forces of nationalism and the concentration of political power. However, their programs lack normative substance. While they both resource various ethical or theological traditions for ethical insights, their ontological commitments make their hermeneutical moves seem arbitrary. This is because many elements they find attractive in other traditions cannot be separated from the internal logic of those traditions. This arbitrariness is made worse by the fact that like the accounts of political liberalism they criticize, Connolly and Coles both take their ethical convictions for granted then proceed to criticize others for being too inflexible with their convictions.

More importantly, it is doubtful that their ethics of life can generate robust forms of solidarity that could sustain the democratic ethics they value because they lack a particular conception of the good grounded in a rich liturgical and theological tradition that could contend for the loyalty in civil society. As the conclusion of the previous chapter made clear, politics partly is about selecting the proper object of faith and devotion. If a political ethics fails to provide an account of a transcendent goal that could suspend and relativize existing loyalties and political identities, then it would not be able to address the problem of nationalism and political

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<sup>315</sup> Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 66.

idolatry, where the survival of the nation becomes the ultimate end. In fact, existential anxiety can be exacerbated by radical democrats, because of their sensitivity to the fragility of pluralism. However, a purely immanent framework cannot provide legitimate amid the contingency of history. So, the problem of existential threat is not surmounted, but ignored.

In the next chapter, this dissertation begins to sketch a positive Christian account of democratic ethics that has the potential to move beyond the limitations of agonists without denying their best insights.

### **Chapter 3: Towards a Theological Theory of the Common Good**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a theological theory of the common good. The first chapter of this dissertation argues that politics is intrinsically theological and that questions regarding the political good cannot be neatly separated from metaphysical considerations. Chapter two identified a number of issues with agonistic models of democratic citizenship that attempt to deal with the problems of identitarian politics without an account of the highest good. This chapter begins the constructive part of the dissertation by providing a positive trinitarian vision for democratic politics that incorporates the insights of Connolly' and Coles' ethos of generous democratic engagement. It does so without conceding to their general skepticism towards Christianity teleology.

This chapter begins by engaging with the thought of Jacques Maritain, one of the most important thinkers of the common good in the last century. It then draws attention to the limitations of Maritain's theory of the common good, arguing that its dualistic soteriology drives a wedge between politics and Christian spirituality. This dualism reinforces the modern and postmodern tendency to see politics as an autonomous realm bracketed off from the transcendent and thus fails to address the problems raised in the last two chapters. In order to redeem Maritain's best insights about the common good, this chapter draws on the works of Robert W. Jenson and Rowan Williams to develop an outline of a theological theory of the common good, which will be more fully fleshed out in the next chapter.

## I. Individuality, Personality, and the Common Good

One of the most critical distinctions in Maritain's theory of the common good is between "individuality" and "personality."<sup>316</sup> This distinction is derived from Maritain's long-standing concern to delineate the relationship between a person and the political community to which she belongs. The need for this delineation emerged in the context of his fight against the totalitarian tendencies of fascism, communism, and the socially disintegrating tendency of capitalism.<sup>317</sup> Individualism and totalitarianism are, for Maritain, two sides of the same coin, since both stem from the failure to grasp that there is a higher destiny to human beings than either the fulfillment of arbitrary desires or the pursuit political ends.<sup>318</sup>

Maritain's political philosophy is firmly rooted in what he takes to be the central anthropological insight of Thomas Aquinas. "The human person," he asserts, "is ordained directly to God as to its absolute ultimate end."<sup>319</sup> God as every human being's ultimate end transcends every temporal good, including the common good of society. Therefore, social institutions are legitimate only insofar as they "minister to the purpose" of every individual's spiritual union with God.<sup>320</sup> The importance of this theological principle cannot be overemphasized in Maritain's thought and Catholic social thought in general. It is precisely

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<sup>316</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 11.

<sup>317</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 4, 51; Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 90–105.

<sup>318</sup> For a discussion of how Maritain developed these ideas in his earlier work see Schultz, "Liberation, Postmodernism, and Jacques Maritain: Confronting Individualism and Collectivism in the Twenty-First Century," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 2 (November 2017): 247–58; Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau*, trans. anonymous (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929); Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

<sup>319</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 15.

<sup>320</sup> Maritain, 16.

because human beings are related first and foremost to God that any kind of political or social reductionism of the human being, such as treating them merely as a means to a political end, must be considered morally problematic.<sup>321</sup>

The absolute transcendence of every human being is reinforced by their freedom, which is capable of intervening in the world of things without being part of it. Human freedom, Maritain asserts, “is not of this world.”<sup>322</sup> Furthermore, since human beings anticipate the beatific vision—the unmediated knowledge of God after death—they are created to commune with God in such a way that their relationship to other created goods, including other created persons, are rendered secondary.<sup>323</sup> This is not to say that there would not be a community of saints in the kingdom of God. Instead, the “society [of saints] accompany” each’s direct participation in God without mutual mediation.<sup>324</sup> If each individual is related to God directly without mediation, then what would be the foundation of human sociality? Maritain’s answer is that the direct relationship with God is what mediates our relationship to one another. Since every individual is ordered to the same God, God becomes the natural common ground on which our loving relationship with one another is built. In other words, creaturely love is first oriented to God and then secondarily ordered to one another by virtue of their common destiny in God.

It follows then that practical reason should be subordinated to speculative reason. The job of the practical (or ethical) intellect is the pursuit of particular temporal goods in society. As such,

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<sup>321</sup> These ideas are taken up, for instance, by Pope John XXII who wrote that: “Any society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely that every human being is a person; that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature.” Pope John XXIII, “Pacem in Terris,” in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 132.

<sup>322</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 20.

<sup>323</sup> Maritain, 21.

<sup>324</sup> Maritain, 24.

Maritain argues that it is ultimately oriented to the political common good. However, the speculative intellect is oriented towards knowing the truth of things as a “personal and solitary act of each one’s intellect.”<sup>325</sup> Similar to his understanding of the relationship between each individual’s relationship with God and one another, Maritain claims that moral pursuits flow from the contemplative mind’s direct union with “things divine,” which perfects the soul with charity.<sup>326</sup> Again, it is every individual’s direct relationship with God that propels them into the lesser realm of temporal moral pursuits. This is not to say that practical activity is unimportant, but that it is secondary relative to the spiritual act of contemplation. In the realm of social life, Maritain is clear that Thomists must affirm the common good as the primary good. It is just that for Maritain, it is important to first establish the political common good as a lesser good than the spiritual good of contemplation and solitary communion with God.

The distinction between the spiritual and political goods is behind Maritain’s distinction between individuality and personality. Maritain argues that by virtue of being both a material and spiritual being, every human being is caught between two principles that stand in tension with one another. One pole he calls individuality; the other he calls personality.<sup>327</sup> A human being as the unity of form and matter is what makes her a material being capable of occupying space and time. Individuality is what gives every person a uniquely identifiable quality. This material dimension of human existence, therefore, asserts itself in some sense as “this and not that.” Individuality is therefore closely connected to the “narrowness of the ego” that forever risks self-assertion at the expense of other individuals.<sup>328</sup> A material individual is also subjected to all the

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<sup>325</sup> Maritain, 25.

<sup>326</sup> Maritain, 26–27.

<sup>327</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 33.

<sup>328</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 37.



contingencies of temporal existence. Its relationship to the physical cosmos is one of utter dependence.<sup>329</sup> The natural environment and society can either nourish or destroy an individual.

Personality, on the other hand, is identified with a human being's intellectual capacities and freedom. A person is in some sense a master of her individuality. She is capable of deciding how she expresses herself and discovers the meaning of her material individuality. More importantly, for Maritain, a person is capable of giving herself to another in love and receiving another person in love.<sup>330</sup> Personality enables a human being to reach out with her intellect into the realm of ideas and to love.<sup>331</sup> Thus, she is no longer confined to her environment or trapped in her individuality as merely a thing among other things in the physical cosmos. Personality is for Maritain, "independent" of its material circumstances, in that that no external circumstance can finally destroy a personality.<sup>332</sup> Personality longs to reach beyond itself and, according to Maritain, requires the nourishment of dialogue with other personalities, not merely physical nourishment. Personality is also "directly related to the absolute" in that its destiny is the beatific vision of God.<sup>333</sup> It is, therefore, properly called the "image of God" by Maritain.<sup>334</sup> However, since a person is also free, she could very well decide to cater to her individuality instead of developing her personality. In so doing, she becomes selfish and anti-social.

It is important to note that personality and individuality are not two separate parts of a human being. They are mutually related. Thus, Maritain explains that there are two reasons why human

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<sup>329</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 66.

<sup>330</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 39.

<sup>331</sup> Maritain, 42.

<sup>332</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 67.

<sup>333</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 42.

<sup>334</sup> Maritain, 42.

beings must live in society and engage with the pursuit of common goods with others. First, personality is intrinsically communal, by virtue of its natural desire to communicate. Second, as material individuals, human beings have natural needs and vulnerabilities.<sup>335</sup> In other words, the dependence of human beings as individuals makes it necessary for them to form a society from which they could receive the conditions necessary for their mutual flourishing.

Human personality, since it is bound up with individuality, cannot develop without education or a healthy environment. This realization leads directly to the concept of the political common good as the good of persons.<sup>336</sup> In short, the common good is the totality of human social communications that enable each human being to live humanly. The political common good is the social conditions that enables people to flourish as the creatures that they are. The common good as a political good of persons does not merely guarantee the freedom of individuals to do as they please or subordinate the good of individuals to the social good taken in the abstract. It is because the common good—if it is truly common—is both good for individuals and constitutive of human personality. A mistaken interpretation of the common good would then reduce it to merely a collection of goods that individuals want as individuals. It is not just that individuals need society in order to flourish materially—important as this is—but that existing in a society governed by common law and in which many public goods—such as cultural traditions, roads, parks, hospitals, schools, and military—are held in common is constitutive of what it means to be a fully developed person.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Maritain, 48.

<sup>336</sup> Maritain, 49.

<sup>337</sup> The same ideas are taken up and developed by the Second Vatican Council: “[T]here is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things ... Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human.” Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Catholic Social Thought*:

As Maritain argues, it is only in a society that human beings develop “civil conscience, political virtue and sense of right and liberty” as well as enjoy “justice, friendship, happiness, virtue, and heroism.”<sup>338</sup> Human beings can also invest things with significance in the company of others, as discussed in the first chapter. So, the exercise of freedom and agency presupposes a tradition of cultural and moral discourse held in common. Political conversations and discernment about the good life are necessary disciplines for the expansion and development of personality and so part of the expression of personality itself.<sup>339</sup> Pluralists rightly value diversity, but when diversity undermines the possibility of communication and thus push human society to the threshold of fragmentation, the common good could also be undermined. This is why even William E. Connolly and Romand Coles try to develop a political ethos that could hold people together amid diversity.

It follows, then, that the common good must be considered a good in itself. If the common good exists for persons, then it must be communicated to every person in society. The common good, therefore, cannot be, for Maritain, the good of either an individualistic society or a totalitarian society that either valorizes individuality or oppresses personality. It is in political society, he argues, that the entire person is engaged—as opposed to societies of common interests, like a hobby club, that only requires a small degree of voluntary commitment.<sup>340</sup>

Persons do not participate in political society voluntarily, they are political by nature.

Persons, Maritain argues, are thus related to the political common good in a seemingly paradoxical way. While as individuals, persons are entirely dependent on society for their own

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*The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 180–81.

<sup>338</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 52.

<sup>339</sup> Maritain, 53.

<sup>340</sup> Maritain, 54.

flourishing. Yet, their personality strives beyond the merely temporal political good toward God and eternal life. This double movement of the human person means that human beings are simultaneously subordinate to the common good and beyond it. Political society, Maritain concludes, can only “preserve” its integrity insofar as it subordinates itself to the supernatural end of human personality, even if individuals have the responsibility to subordinate their private interests to the common good.<sup>341</sup> There is, thus, something intrinsic to human beings that escapes the grasp of the political, because it is related first to God the ultimate common (that is, the good that is common to all creation). This is why Maritain applauds those who abandon social life for a life of contemplation just as much as those who make sacrifices on behalf of the political common good and justice.<sup>342</sup> Both groups of people are, for Maritain, properly ordered to God and insofar as they serve God in different ways, they still serve the political common good.

It is not surprising, given Maritain’s theological anthropology, that human rights are grounded in human personality. Because human beings are ordered to an end that is higher than the political common good, they possess an inherent dignity that cannot be suspended even for the good of the community. As already discussed, the purpose of a political society is to service the needs of human beings. Insofar as it honors that role, society must respect human beings as ends in themselves. This entails that certain inherent rights—such as freedom of conscience and freedom of assembly—must be respected.<sup>343</sup> But this conception of political ethics is, for

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<sup>341</sup> Maritain, 62.

<sup>342</sup> Maritain, 64.

<sup>343</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 103–7.

Maritain, inseparable from the Christian tradition.<sup>344</sup> For Maritain, it is Christianity that first revealed that human persons have inherent dignity and that they have a destiny higher than that of political society.<sup>345</sup> These components of the Christian Gospel is then responsible for stirring in human hearts the desire for social progress. What human beings anticipate in their struggles for social justice is, according to Maritain, “the kingdom of God.”<sup>346</sup> Maritain does not believe that it is necessary for one to be a Christian in order to respect human rights.<sup>347</sup> Yet, he does believe it would be difficult to find justifications the proper limits of politics and human rights apart from the Christian gospel and the natural law tradition.<sup>348</sup>

## II. The Problem of Maritain’s Dualistic Soteriology

For Maritain, the idea that human persons transcend their contingent political communities requires a belief in a transcendent destiny for human beings. It is a human being’s spiritual density that prevents her from being subordinated, ultimately, to the common good of the earthly city. Following the same line of argumentation, John Courtney Murry argues that the limitation of government in political (rather than secular) liberalism only makes sense if the government recognizes the primacy of intermediary associations in civil society. The church should be “free to define herself and to exercise to the full her spiritual jurisdiction.”<sup>349</sup> The

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<sup>344</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 86.

<sup>345</sup> Maritain, 26–28.

<sup>346</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 28.

<sup>347</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 78.

<sup>348</sup> Maritain, 78–79.

<sup>349</sup> John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 80.

freedom of the church, Murry believes, is paramount in reminding the state of its limits and that it is accountable to something that transcends itself.

This understanding of the human person as having a dignity that transcends their role in the political community has Christian roots. Given the critique of foundationalism in the previous chapter, it is difficult to disagree with Maritain that this conception of the human can be understood apart from the political imagination generated by Christianity. Nevertheless, the point remains: without acknowledging a transcendent destiny, human beings risk becoming subordinated to the nation or the state.<sup>350</sup> It is a commitment to a transcendent common good that properly frames the penultimate common goods that human beings are to pursue. The same commitment is also the energy behind the activity to seek out better and more inclusive forms of social belonging that are not reducible to identitarian politics.

However, a number of issues in Maritain's framework deserve attention. In Maritain's scheme, the two destinies of the human person remain extrinsically related, despite his efforts to integrate them. The fulfillment of a human being's higher spiritual destiny leaves behind the penultimate destiny. Maritain's framework does not show how a relationship to God as the ultimate common good is mediated by human engagement in the earthly common good. To be sure, love of God should lead to a love of political neighbors for Maritain. He affirms, for instance, that necessity should demand some to abandon the "nobler" activity of contemplation for the sake of the common good.<sup>351</sup> However, this act of sacrifice is still done for the sake of charity and directed toward something that, in the end, appears to have no spiritual value except

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<sup>350</sup> This is not to deny the possibility that there could be a secular antidote to political idolatry.

<sup>351</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 65.

as a demonstration that the person performing the charitable deed enjoys a prior intimate relationship with God that does not depend on such acts.

In other words, it is not clear how the love of neighbor or the common good is intrinsically valuable as a necessary part of a relationship with God. If society is, as Maritain argues, the correlate of human vulnerabilities, then it follows that without these vulnerabilities, there would no longer be a common good, except the common good that is God, which is enjoyed by persons individually without the mediation of community. Even Maritain's understanding of personality is not essentially social since they are social only by their desire to share what was already within them. So, persons who do not possess the "deficiencies" of individuation do not need to receive anything from one another anything that they do not already possess in themselves.<sup>352</sup>

What is important to point out is that Maritain's individualistic theological anthropology is not just his problem as a theologian. This framework has more or less reached the level of Catholic magisterial social teachings. In Anselm Kyongsuk Min's incisive criticism of the Vatican's condemnation of liberation theology in 1984, he charged that the Vatican's theological alternative to liberation theology is based on theological anthropology that abstracts the human person from historical and social mediations.<sup>353</sup> According to Min, the Vatican construes the human subject to be "isolated from all relations except the relation to God, a transcendent, not historically concrete subject."<sup>354</sup> Just so, the reason behind the Christian imperative to struggle

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<sup>352</sup> Maritain, 73.

<sup>353</sup> Min, *Dialectic of Salvation*, 125–26.

<sup>354</sup> Min, 126.

for justice and to transform society is merely the positivistic affirmation that God “commands” Christians to engage in the work of love and to pursue justice.<sup>355</sup>

Apart from this command, Min argues, it makes no sense to care about social justice insofar as human salvation and spiritual liberation can be accomplished apart from any engagement with social structures—things that are apparently extrinsic to the spiritual freedom of the individual Christian. Min’s thesis is that the political theology of the Vatican fails to recognize that human beings are “concrete totalities” who can only work out their transcendence and thus salvation as historical and social creatures inextricably bound up with social institutions.<sup>356</sup> Min’s assessment of the political theology of the Catholic magisterium can be applied to the general conceptual scheme of Maritain’s theology. As Min argues, an adequate political theology must be careful not to suggest that salvation is simply the “transcendence *of* all history” but instead should understand salvation as “the salvation of all history through the many concrete, liberating transcendences of historical oppression and alienation, that is, *through* the liberation, transformation, and reconciliation of our existence *in* history.”<sup>357</sup>

Min’s criticism also helps to show that Maritain’s understanding of individuality and personality is still too dualistic. Human freedom and intellectuality are both cultivated and expressed in social contexts. Min points out that “the creative action of individuals presupposes ... a set of preexisting economic, political, and cultural conditions.”<sup>358</sup> Social conditions not only color the exercise of human freedom, but they also provide the “material means of such acts.”<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Min, 134.

<sup>356</sup> Min, 185.

<sup>357</sup> Italics in original. Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 105–6.

<sup>358</sup> Min, *Dialectic of Salvation*, 142.

<sup>359</sup> Min, 145.



In other words, persons act in a certain way, because they have been shaped by the ideologies, patterns, and pressures of the larger society. Furthermore, they can only act within the limits imposed by the objective material conditions. For instance, when managers of corporations blame market necessity for paying workers below subsistence wage, they are referring to these social pressures that press them to act in certain ways.<sup>360</sup> To pay workers more could mean, for instance, that the company might suffer the consequences of the loss of profit or investors. Thus, social structures both disciplines and limits human freedom.<sup>361</sup>

Contrary to Maritain's confident assertion that social situation cannot destroy human freedom, then, one should agree with Min that freedom itself is contingent on the social context that both nourishes it and provides the conditions of its expression.<sup>362</sup> So, personality and individuality are far more interdependent than Maritain seems to allow. Human interdependence is at the core of what it means to be human and this fact must also inflect transcendent personality. The common good of political society should thus also be understood to be a spiritual, though penultimate, good. The struggle for justice just is to perform spiritual transcendence in history. The implication of bringing personality and individuality together means that the political common good and the totality of public goods that are implied are not

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<sup>360</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "The Unfreedom of the Free Market," in *Wealth, Poverty, and Human Destiny*, ed. Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 119–25.

<sup>361</sup> Pope John Paul II is more nuanced about this, but still maintains, in a stoic fashion, that freedom is immune to the contingency of history: "While these [external conditions] certainly have an influence on freedom, they do not determine it; they make the exercise of freedom more difficult or less difficult, but they cannot destroy it." Pope John Paul II, "Centesimus Annus," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 457.

<sup>362</sup> Min, *Dialectic of Salvation*, 146.

only necessary for the proper development of human material personality but are necessary for the proper development of human personality as well.

A related criticism of Maritain is that by construing salvation as purely the affair of an individual in abstraction from the community, Maritain's approach neglects the political nature of the church as a social body of believers. Sometimes, Maritain makes reference to the church as a social body, but he seems to spiritualize the church as to evacuate all of its social or political relevance. For Maritain, the church lives, "above the plane of civil society" and is a "supra-temporal" society.<sup>363</sup> Maritain insists that the movement of human personality finally toward something that is "not Caesar's," that is to say, not political.<sup>364</sup> This gives the impression that social existence is something that human beings will eventually grow out of after the eschaton, just as they will grow out of their mutual interdependence and behold God's face individually.

This line of criticism is most forcefully developed by William T. Cavanaugh, who chides Maritain for coming dangerously close to the Kantian division between "noumenal and phenomenal" by similarly strictly separating human beings' social nature from their spiritual nature.<sup>365</sup> This dualism is then reflected by Maritain's ecclesiology, which tends to spiritualize the church by relegating it to the supra-temporal realm concerned solely with the salvation of individual Christians. This dualism then makes it impossible for the church to challenge and unsettle earthly allegiances to the nation-state and undermines Maritain's attempt to circumscribe the moral authority of the state. One does not have to follow Cavanaugh's often one-sided ecclesiocentrism to appreciate his criticism of Maritain's apolitical church.

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<sup>363</sup> Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 77.

<sup>364</sup> Maritain, 77.

<sup>365</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and the Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 181.

In Maritain's theological framework, Christians are simply commanded to be politically active, a command that cannot but appear arbitrary. This is not to say that a Christian must reject the venerable theological tradition of the beatific vision as a possibility. Rather, Maritain's separation of the spiritual from the historical and his emphasis on the beatific vision as opposed to the resurrection of the body tends to reinforce an ahistorical spirituality and eschatology. It is important to recall that, as discussed in the last chapter, part of Connolly's worry—shared by other political agonists—about theological politics is that it has the gnostic tendency to devalue earthly existence that could prevent Christians from facing the fragility and vulnerabilities of human existence or sense the urgency of penultimate political action. This, at best, locks Christians into an isolated space where they could pay lip service to the creation of a better world while complacently contemplate the truths about God in their privacy. At worse, this could lead to public policies that ignore human beings' dependence on vulnerable economic and ecological systems. Salvation cannot mean the escape of history, but to be fully immersed in its ambiguities.

As Robert W. Jenson points out, if political hopes and aspirations are not somehow fulfilled in the eschaton, then the eschaton could only appear as the cancellation of politics.<sup>366</sup> For him, “eschatological hope must be hope for all other hopes, or it is not eschatological.”<sup>367</sup> Theological dualism, then, drives a wedge between God and politics that leaves politics in a nihilistic space subjected to its own internal fallen dynamics without the possibility of redemption: this comes very close to Nietzsche's doctrine of the “eternal return.” Rather, history must itself be seen as

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<sup>366</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “Eschatological Politics and Political Eschatology,” in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 18.

<sup>367</sup> Jenson, 18.

being open to God's radical future.<sup>368</sup> A more satisfying account of God as the ultimate political common good must, therefore, show how a relationship to God is political effective in the sense that politics is a way to encounter the God of the eschaton. It is to this end that Jenson's work is pertinent.

### III. Toward a Trinitarian Theological Theory of the Common Good

A better theological account of the common good must go beyond Maritain's dualism. Of course, this move is not simply politically pragmatic. Rather, it is necessary according to the inner logic of Christian confessions about the kingdom of God. A central Christian hope is that the whole of creation will be redeemed and be reconciled to God in Christ.<sup>369</sup> In order to develop such a theological model, Jenson's theology will be resourced.<sup>370</sup> Jenson's contribution lies in providing a different account of the relationship between politics and eschatology, which is understood to be part of the economy of God's salvation.

In "Triunity of the Common Good," Jenson connects the political concept of the common good to his Trinitarian theology. He is thus more attentive to the historical dimension of the Christian narrative than Maritain, who tends to focus on natural law rather than God's activities

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<sup>368</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *God after God* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 18–19.

<sup>369</sup> Romans 8:20–21

<sup>370</sup> It is important to note that Jenson is well known for his controversial revisionary metaphysics. His lifelong project has been to engage critically with classical conceptions of God—the conception of God found in Augustine, Aquinas, and many church fathers of the Patristic period. When resourcing Jenson as a political theologian, it is not necessary to go into the details of his ambitious metaphysical project. Jenson's revisionary metaphysics is compelling, although many of his criticisms of the classical theism of Aquinas and Augustine tend to be overstated. The focus of this section will be on Jenson's political thought. Of course, metaphysics is not finally separable from politics. Nevertheless, the general contour of Jenson's political thought can be appropriated by Christians who take different metaphysical positions, as long as they are committed to the basic doctrines of ecumenical Christianity.

in history. Agreeing with Augustine, Jenson understands common good as “an object of a shared longing that by funding certain virtuous draws a number of persons to live together in mutually understood and practiced ways, that is, within some rule of law.”<sup>371</sup> A common good, Jenson argues, should be distinguished from an object of common interest in that “good” has a moral quality. To be a community that gathers around a common good is to discipline one’s immediate desires and narrow interests for its sake. This also means that a community organized around a common good is a community in which moral questions are asked and answered and that the members of such a community are in some sense responsive to this discourse. The assumption is that the people in a political community or polity is accountable to some end that is simultaneously beyond them and mediates their relationship to one another.<sup>372</sup>

If a political community is one that is organized around a moral good, then it does not necessarily have to coincide with the modern nation-state, which is but one way of organizing a community of political and thus moral discourse. A polity is then a community that shares a world of signification or meaning. So far, Jenson’s understanding of a political community coincides with that of Kahn’s, which is discussed in the first chapter. However, there is one twist. For Jenson, if the common good that the community pursues is understood to be ontologically contingent and dependent on the community itself, then the good is thereby reduced to the accidental convergence of interests.<sup>373</sup>

Jenson is here assuming that unless the common good transcends the community, it would lack the ability to morally bind members of a community to one another. Jenson believes

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<sup>371</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” in *In Search of the Common Good*, ed. Dennis P. McCann and Patrick D. Miller (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 333–34.

<sup>372</sup> Jenson, 337.

<sup>373</sup> Jenson, 338.

that if a good that is, in this way, sub-moral is merely an object of interest, which at any moment can be changed or rejected. This is not entirely accurate, however. A community can, of course, enshrine itself—its survival and ethos—as the ultimate common good. As Oliver O'Donovan points out, a community can easily “[lock] the transcendence of God into the structures of [a political community’s] particularity.”<sup>374</sup> The possibility of political ethics, therefore, does not hinge on a good being independent of a community in the way Jenson describes. A purely immanent political ethics, based on no higher end than the moral conventions of the community itself, is entirely possible.

Nevertheless, Jenson is right in saying that something is amiss unless the common good can be said to transcend the community itself in some sense. First, unless the ultimate common good transcends the historical community itself, then the survival of the polity risks becoming the ultimate political end, as the first chapter of this dissertation points out. If the community becomes an end in itself, the ethical shape of a political community would be determined by security or cultural homogeneity, as was shown in the previous chapters.<sup>375</sup> Borrowing from Hannah Arendt, Rowan Williams defines public life as a “continuum of language and interaction” that “finite and timebound” human beings insert themselves.<sup>376</sup> Politics, therefore, enable finite human lives to take on a significance that transcends death. However, if the hope of meaning and significance hinges on political identity, then conflicts, divisions, and cultural pluralism might be seen to undermine that identity. So, if a community’s conception of the

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<sup>374</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 41.

<sup>375</sup> Liberal communities, for instance, feel the pressure to give up its highest values in the light of national security threats. Connolly’s identitarians, on the other hand, feel the pressure to secure a homogenous cultural unit immune to the contingencies of time in light of the messy history of perpetual “becoming.”

<sup>376</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 107.

common good is purely immanent, the political idolatry that Maritain and Murray fear might result.

Second, a common good that is not transcendent cannot thereby be truly “common.” For Jenson, in all social constructivist accounts of the common good, the good could only be some people’s good. So, there is no ontological basis to affirm that there is indeed some greater common good that everyone shares. As a result, the default political ethics might be something like the agonistic model, which reduces politics to a struggle for hegemony—the struggle to impose “our” conception of the good. This is why, for Augustine, the city of man will always be about the pursuit of pride, glory, and domination.<sup>377</sup> The Christian contention, for Jenson, is that there is hope for a peace that transcends and unifies differences so that every instance of conflict could be interpreted as an opportunity to move closer to the true or to the kingdom of God, even if sin often thwarts such opportunities.<sup>378</sup>

For these two reasons, Jenson is correct to argue that an adequate polity must see its common good as transcending the community—its institutions, ethos, and perpetuation. However, an adequate theology of the common good also cannot go too far in the other direction. The common good of the community must also include the totality of penultimate goods that make the community what it is. If the common good of the community transcends the community without qualification, Maritain’s dualism returns. If the common object of love—God—is eschatologically accessible without the mediation of community, then it cannot be considered common at all, except in the accidental sense of everyone loving it at the same time.

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<sup>377</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), XIX, 25.

<sup>378</sup> John Milbank, therefore, rightly argues that Christianity poses an “ontology of peace” as opposed to an “ontology of violence,” which characterizes postmodern political thought. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xvi.

Members of the community would, again, be related to one another only as a collection of individuals. But should one to avoid both problems? Jenson proposes that one understands the common good as a historical reality that draws the community together for an eschatological end.

For Jenson, Christians should see penultimate political aspirations and achievements as “way stations within the pull of a goal of all reality.”<sup>379</sup> In other words, human spirituality is expressed horizontally as the active anticipation of God’s eschatological future. Relationship with God is not merely an individual’s vertical communion with God, who is above and beyond history, but worked out in history. Rather, God is experienced as a historical community’s transcendence towards an eschatological goal of a final shalom, which is history’s final inclusion within God’s eternal kingdom. A movement towards God is simultaneously a movement forward in time. For Jenson, to encounter God is to be summoned by a God whose freedom “intrudes” on history and thereby opens history up to new possibilities. The telos of this push forward in time is God’s perfect communion with the human community (or deification) along with the rest of creation. In this model, the good of the political community is both itself and beyond itself, because the good that it looks forward to is precisely its own future of being united to God.

In order to avoid political idolatry, the political common good must be other than the contingent political community one inhabits. Yet, in order to avoid political escapism, the common good cannot be other than the political community itself. Jenson’s framework resolves the paradox by showing that the Christian political life is precisely about anticipating the unity of God and the human community through Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is the embodiment of this unity. The common good of the political community is the eschatological realization of

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<sup>379</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 339.



justice and freedom in God. To look at the common good of a political community as both the political community itself and beyond it is, for Jenson, to have a trinitarian understanding of the common good. As he succinctly puts, to “enter into the kingdom of God must somehow be entry into a polity that God himself is in himself.”<sup>380</sup>

This point needs to be elaborated in conjunction with Jenson basic Trinitarian theological framework. He outlines the basics of Christian Trinitarian doctrine by stipulating that God is the movement of self-giving love between the Father, Son, and Spirit: “The being of God is Opening and being Opened, Promise and Hope. The love of the Father and the Son is their relation to their mutual future in the Spirit, always anticipated in the Father but never bound.”<sup>381</sup> Salvation history is the process of humanity and all of creation being integrated into this mutual love.<sup>382</sup> Here, there is no need to dwell on Jenson’s peculiar metaphysical revision of the doctrine or his critique of classical Thomism. What matter is that the Trinity, as experienced in God’s history of salvation, is the movement of God uniting himself with human beings and, through them, all of creation in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jenson distinguishes himself from other social Trinitarians, such as Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, and Miroslav Wolf, who use the Trinity taken in the abstract as a model of the Christian community.<sup>383</sup> Instead, Jenson believes the political relevance of the Trinity cannot be

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<sup>380</sup> Jenson, 340.

<sup>381</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Ramsey, PA: Sigler Press, 1989), 127.

<sup>382</sup> Jenson, 138–39.

<sup>383</sup> For social Trinitarian approaches to politics, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (New York: Orbis Books, 1988); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

abstracted from the history of salvation as experienced by Israel and the church.<sup>384</sup> He rightly shows that the Trinitarian message of the Gospel is that creation will be united in Christ, the image of the Father, by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, the Trinity is not a model of the human community, but the very movement of transcendence, reconciliation, and justice in history.<sup>385</sup> Since this movement cannot be understood apart from Israel and Jesus, it likewise cannot be thought apart from the church.

Alongside other postliberal theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, Jenson is thus suspicious of any political theology that is done in isolation from ecclesiology. The church should have theological priority, Jenson claims, because it is the body of Christ and has the Spirit as its organizing energy.<sup>386</sup> The church is the closest thing history has to a polity that fits the description of explicitly having itself and God as the object of common love, precisely because the church is both the body of Christ and yet not simply identical to Christ who is its eschatological destiny. As Jenson makes clear, “the church can now be the people of God only in anticipation of that gathering as the community that lives by what God will eschatologically make of it.”<sup>387</sup> To say that the church is the body of Christ is to say that it anticipates and participates in the eschatological reality that it proclaims. The eschatological *totus Christus* is thus nothing less than the full inclusion of the human community in God’s life,

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<sup>384</sup> For compelling criticisms of the social Trinitarian approach see Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (October 2000): 432–45; Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207–46.

<sup>385</sup> It is because the church is the objective presence of the second person of the Trinity that Jenson says that we should be looking “at each other” when praying. Christians in the church, therefore, address each other as members of the same body of Christ, not as members of the Trinity. Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 162–64.

<sup>386</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 343.

<sup>387</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 172.

so the current church is merely a shadow in comparison to what it will one day be.<sup>388</sup> However, insofar as the church is animated by the same Spirit that animates all of creation in the eschaton, it participates in that reality.

Therefore, for Jenson, it is impossible to understand the nature of public life, without first understanding the church as itself a social body. It is for this reason that Jenson calls the church a polity. His understanding of the church as animated by the Spirit of God helps to illuminate his thesis that the church is a polity that is more properly political than a community organized by the secular state. For Jenson, the Spirit is essentially God's generative (or creative) energy.<sup>389</sup> The Spirit is the freedom of God that militates against the forces that seek to enslave and oppress creation.<sup>390</sup> Jesus is thus rightly portrayed as a bearer of the Spirit in whom the generative possibilities of God are experienced, especially in his crossing of ethnic, cultural, and class boundaries that reify human communities in his time. But Jesus crossed those boundaries not for its own sake, but for the sake of drawing all of creation into the Triune movement of God's love. The Spirit is, thus, not only the animating power of God but "the love into which all things will at last be brought."<sup>391</sup> In other words, the Spirit is the power of God's eschatological future liberating the present.

For Jenson, the power of the Spirit is most clearly embodied by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in that the liberating power of God worked, through him, to overcome the powers that hold creation in bondage. The most dramatic instance of this is the liberation of

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<sup>388</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.

<sup>389</sup> Jenson, 86.

<sup>390</sup> Jenson, "The Trinity of Common Good," 343.

<sup>391</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God*, 157.

Jesus from death.<sup>392</sup> The Spirit, therefore, can be thought of as the power that refuses the power of fallen nature's inertia, the power that frees creation from every source of unfreedom.

Translating this key insight into the moral and political register, the Spirit both frees individuals from selfishness and institutions from injustice. The primary means the Spirit does this in these registers is by means of prophecy: words that unsettle the ethical and political status quo. This is why Jenson's pneumatology is a radical witness against any political ideology that proclaims the end of history. If the Spirit is the power that frees creation from the "predictabilities" of history, then the Spirit cannot be reduced to a mechanism that claims, prior to moral discourse, how human communities should organize itself.<sup>393</sup> Rather, because God's eschatological Spirit is always operative to liberate history for freedom, politics should always be measured by its openness to "prophecy."<sup>394</sup>

The priority of the church, for Jenson, is not based on its unique holiness or insight. Rather, it is the church's explicit openness to prophecy as a people who submit to Christ's discipline that makes it more adequately political than other sorts of political communities. Jenson believes modern politics has ceased to be political, because it stopped being about moral discourse. Here, one hears echoes of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the secular state. The sheer size of many modern nation-states and the moral pluralism they inevitably confront, MacIntyre argues, makes it impossible to achieve moral consensus on many issues.<sup>395</sup> More importantly, for MacIntyre, the coupling of moral pluralism and modern bureaucratic (or instrumental) rationality rules out moral discourse altogether. As a result, MacIntyre famously states that modern politics

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<sup>392</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 181.

<sup>393</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God*, 160; Robert W. Jenson, "Toward a Christian Theory of the Public," *Dialog* 23, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 193–94.

<sup>394</sup> Jenson, "Toward a Christian Theory of the Public," 195.

<sup>395</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 182.

is “civil war carried on by other means.”<sup>396</sup> To MacIntyre’s criticism, Jenson adds that because modern politics tends to reduce politics to the play of interest groups, it is often seen as a sub-discipline of liberal economics.<sup>397</sup> Thus, the political culture of modernity is such that politics is often interpreted as the successful management of conflicting interests, just as the a successful free market is one that efficiently matches the production of commodities and the desires of individual consumers. Politics, according to this model, is about the balance of interests.<sup>398</sup>

This is not to suggest, of course, that God cannot act in such a political system or that moral discourse cannot occur from time to time. Critiquing the modern secular state as it currently is should not be equated with its wholesale rejection or to suggest that the state cannot be brought closer to the Christian ideal of democratic politics. It is also possible to take issue with MacIntyre and Jenson’s overly pessimistic characterization of modern secular politics. Rawlsian liberalism does not, for instance, conceive of politics as the management of interests, but the achievement of a well-ordered society of equality and justice. However, Jenson’s larger point stands. Politics can be responsive to the imperative of justice insofar as it can be subjected to moral discourse and criticism.

For Jenson, politics is not truly political unless it stands for something higher than the management of interests. Political struggles are always for the sake of some common end that sustains and propels it. A politics based on the management of interests collapses into political nihilism and fatalism. It merely inverts Maritain’s dualism: Instead of understanding salvation as

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<sup>396</sup> MacIntyre, 294.

<sup>397</sup> Jenson, “Toward a Christian Theory of the Public,” 192.

<sup>398</sup> A politics based on a “balance of power” as defended by Reinhold Niebuhr would likewise be considered sub-political by Jenson. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 237.

being unrelated to the struggles of history, politics as management of interests sees politics as an autonomous realm with its own rules and insulated from transcendence. Perhaps, the only use transcendence has would be to serve as a regulative ideal, checking the rough edges of power struggles, as in Niebuhr's model.<sup>399</sup> However, for Jenson, precisely because politics is essentially teleological, political agents cannot bracket the eschatological question forever. There has to be some hope, even an ultimate (even if not transcendent) hope, that sustains political activities. In fact, for Jenson, politics is simply the "institutionalization" of an eschatology, whether it is Christian or not.<sup>400</sup> In other words, politics is inevitably organized by both an object of love and of hope.

However, if politics is inevitably trapped in a perennial negotiation of conflicts without the possibility of reconciliation, then hope is necessarily about the (violent) imposition of one group's interest over that of another's. Or else hope is invested in the discovery of a formal mechanism that would enable successful negotiations of conflicting interests, without regard to the question of what should bind the community together in the first place. These options lead either to political nihilism or what Rowan Williams calls "programmatic secularism," which prioritizes an instrumentalized view of political processes.<sup>401</sup> At the end of the day, this kind of secularism reduces political society to an instrument of mutual advantage. This then risks the kind of totalization of politics that rightly worries Maritain. Without a transcendent end, the autonomous political realm becomes an end in itself.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Niebuhr, 81.

<sup>400</sup> Jenson, "Toward a Christian Theory of the Public," 195.

<sup>401</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012), 27.

<sup>402</sup> Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 54–56. As Keys compellingly argues, William Galston's

#### IV. Politics, Metaphysics, and Theology

However, in order for agents of political struggle to view politics as more than the imposition of a group's hegemonic will or the fair negotiation of interests, broader metaphysical questions cannot be avoided, as Jenson rightly intuits. In order to clarify the relationship between politics and metaphysics, it is helpful to turn to an essay by Rowan Williams. In "Between Politics and Metaphysics" Williams lucidly develops the argument of why politics needs a metaphysics of transcendence or even eschatology. Williams begins the essay by acknowledging the risk metaphysics poses to politics. Ideological ways of construing metaphysics might use it merely as an attempt to either produce a political praxis based on purely abstract thought or to shore up already existing political projects with "supra-human guarantee that no human commitment can possibly have."<sup>403</sup> Yet, for Williams, there remain fundamental questions regarding politics that cannot be resolved simply by appealing to the empirical state of epistemological pluralism and competing interests, as agonists do, precisely because politics happen in a context where questions about power and the right distribution of scarce resources arise.

First, one cannot avoid considering how to construe such pluralism and competing desires. One option is to see it as an "occasion of war" and reduce epistemological differences to conflicts between arbitrary interests.<sup>404</sup> Another option is to see politics as an occasion of negotiating a "common life," where arbitrary desires and partial perspectives are subjected to due discipline so that a more universal and comprehensive conception of justice might emerge.<sup>405</sup>

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political program based on value pluralism could not avoid making survival the highest end of politics, which can justify any means to secure it.

<sup>403</sup> Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higon (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 56.

<sup>404</sup> Williams, 55.

<sup>405</sup> Williams, 56.

But to speak about justice in this way is to talk about something that is quite other than the empirical state of affairs. It is, rather, to investigate the transcendental conditions of these non-arbitrary ethical commitments themselves. Williams argues that construing politics in this latter way has a more “contemplative or non-functional dimension” that has to do more with the way we perceive reality.<sup>406</sup> What is needed is a transcendental horizon within which politics is understood as the movement of adjustment towards a new ethical way of being. This new way of being must also be recognizable by the parties involved as irreducible to arbitrary class or group interests.

Borrowing from Gillian Rose, Williams argues that an adequate reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* should see Hegel as embodying just the kind of gradual adjustment necessary for political negotiations.<sup>407</sup> For both Williams and Rose, Hegel’s most important insight is that thinking and acting never takes place in a pristine state of innocence. Consciousness is always already involved in situations distorted by power relations, false consciousness, and violence. Nevertheless, it is not by fleeing history and temporality that freedom is achieved, as it is for the “beautiful soul.”<sup>408</sup> Rather, it is by confronting the ambiguities of history and the inevitable struggle this entails that more adequate forms of consciousness and being can be realized. Williams points out that the task of broadening one’s consciousness and removing unjust social structures that embody false consciousness cannot begin unless one is committed to “staking” ... a claim on what it is that human agents, or subjects as such, are answerable to and engaged

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<sup>406</sup> Williams, 57.

<sup>407</sup> Williams, 61.

<sup>408</sup> Williams, 62.



in.”<sup>409</sup> Without this staking, there could be no politics, even as one recognizes that better alternatives in the future will sublate one’s current position.

However, to understand history and politics as this process of learning is to be committed to a position about the relationship between politics and metaphysics. Williams argues that to see history as this broadening of the perception of justice is to see history itself as a process of “coming to learn.”<sup>410</sup> This is not to suggest that history can yield a totalizing framework within which problems can be worked out abstractly, as many critics of Hegel have wrongly suggested. Rather, it is to be committed to history as the theater of metaphysics. In other words, to immerse oneself in history’s struggles and conflicts is to attempt to remove the sources of alienation and to “adjust” toward a state of seeing and being where political actors can potentially find mutual recognition.<sup>411</sup> To be committed to politics as the task of moving towards justice is to see history as an arena where the truth can be gradually discovered.

Along the same lines, Andrew Shanks correctly argues that Christian faith implies a stance of “true-as-openness” or maximal “xenophilia.”<sup>412</sup> By xenophilia, shanks means the absolute commitment to dialogical generosity through which intellectual horizons can be enlarged. So, contrary to the agonist critics of Christian faith, such as Connolly and Coles in the previous chapter, Christians have good theological reasons to adopt the ethics of receptive generosity. There is one important difference between Christians and agonists, however. Whereas agonists believe that epistemically generosity depends on an ironic attitude vis-à-vis faith commitments, Christians are epistemically generous because of their faith in the Spirit, which they accord with

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<sup>409</sup> Williams, 66.

<sup>410</sup> Williams, 67.

<sup>411</sup> Williams, 70.

<sup>412</sup> Andrew Shanks, *Hegel versus “Inter-Faith Dialogue:” A General Theory of True Xenophilia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3, 5.

“absolute authority.”<sup>413</sup> For Shanks and Williams, it is Christian faith that enables one to see history as a struggle for truth and freedom.

Williams is aware that to see history and politics in this way is not to have a determinate political program. Proper political action can only be discerned and negotiated in particular contexts. However, understanding history this way is to be “pressed towards a metaphysics in which difference is *neither* (at any moment) final, a matter of mutual exclusion, *nor* simply reducible, a matter of misperception to be resolved by either a return to the same or cancellation of one term before another.”<sup>414</sup> In other words, to look at politics as a movement towards peace and reconciliation is to refuse ontologies of violence that affirms differences to be finally irreconcilable. It is to be committed to an ontology of peace, to borrow a phrase from Milbank.<sup>415</sup> For Williams, this metaphysical commitment again to gestures towards the Judeo-Christian narrative where history is affirmed to be the theater of God’s reconciling work of salvation. To affirm history as a history of reconciliation is to echo the story of the logos working out God’s salvation in history. The church, then, is precisely called to the vocation of embodying a “corporate life” that challenges partial “sectional interest and proprietorial models of power.”<sup>416</sup> In other words, the church is called to bear witness to the common good of all humanity.

## V. Church and Society

William’s vision of what the church is called to do converges with Jenson’s ecclesiology. For Jenson, to be the church is to be open to prophecy and to be a social body that prophesies. He,

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<sup>413</sup> Andrew Shanks, *Faith in Honesty: The Essential Nature of Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 1.

<sup>414</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 71.

<sup>415</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xviii.

<sup>416</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 72.

therefore, names the most faithful governing structure of the church “participatory monarchy” or “organic democracy.”<sup>417</sup> This organic democracy has many characteristics. First, it cannot be based on coercion or domination, because such a polity would service merely sectional interests and partial political ends.<sup>418</sup> Second, it must be a community where differences are sublated by a spirit of mutual love and service. Otherwise, differences would, again, lead to parochial conflicts. Third, it must be a polity where every member is potentially a medium of God’s prophetic words. It is this third element that makes Jenson’s theology of the common good unique.<sup>419</sup> Why is it that it is not enough for the community to merely engage in moral deliberation? What makes it necessary for a community’s moral deliberation to be understood as the giving and receiving of prophecy?

The answer is intimately related to the necessity of having a common object of love that both transcends the polity and is identical to it. As Maritain and Williams both point out, it is inadequate to conceive of a political community as merely a product of interests or the ultimate end in itself. If politics is merely about the mediation of interest, then political deliberation is reducible to power struggles. On the other hand, if political community is the ultimate end, then parochial interests and political identity might get absolutized. These two risks can be broadly understood to fall under Jenson’s understanding of the politics of “mechanism,” which is, for him, the antithesis of the doctrine of creation.<sup>420</sup> The politics of mechanism, for Jenson, describes a politics that is closed to transcendence.<sup>421</sup> In other words, it is a politics of closure. The politics

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<sup>417</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 343; Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 81.

<sup>418</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 81.

<sup>419</sup> Jenson, 82–83.

<sup>420</sup> Jenson, 84.

<sup>421</sup> Similarly, Juan Luis Segundo interprets the forces that hold back human creative love as the Pauline “flesh” and the Johannine “world.” Juan Luis Segundo, *Grace and the Human*

of closure can be enacted differently for Jenson.<sup>422</sup> As mentioned before, politics characterized by the management of interests or a totalizing identity could both be read as politics of closure.

Political deliberation, mechanistically conceived, presupposes that moral questions are already settled and so what remains of politics is merely the working out of preexisting principles.<sup>423</sup> But this mechanistic vision necessarily buffers itself from moral judgment—that is, the fundamental tenets of hegemonic values are not called into question. Another example of this would be a conception of (political) economy that is freed from moral discourse about the common good and reduced to a collection of individual economic acts based on narrowly conceived self-interest. The politics of mechanism is essentially closed to the kind of “coming to learn” and moral “adjustments” that characterizes Williams’ and Shanks’ vision. So, the calling of the church in our time is to be a prophetic community that bears prophetic witness to the larger society so that it might, from time to time, listen to and respond to prophesy and, in so doing, become a better “analogy” of the heavenly polity that the church points to.<sup>424</sup> This is what Jenson means when he argues that the church’s presence in history should mediate the true common object of love, God, to the world around it.<sup>425</sup>

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*Condition*, trans. John Drury, vol. II, *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1973), 77–83.

<sup>422</sup> Both totalitarian fascism and liberal managerialism are forms of mechanism for Jenson. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 75; Jenson, “Toward a Christian Theory of the Public,” 192.

<sup>423</sup> This is Romand Coles’ concern about liberalism’s policing of political speech as discussed in the previous chapter. Though I am less confident that one could justifiably characterize all forms of liberalism this way.

<sup>424</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 344; Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1960), 165–77. Barth also sees the church and society as having an analogous relationship as vehicles of God’s truth.

<sup>425</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 344–45.

## VI. Conclusion

An adequate conception of the common good—if it were to have any hope of overcoming theological dualism and political idolatry—must be both transcendent and immanent. Jenson’s trinitarian conception of the common good provides an outline of just such a conception. Salvation history, in this model, is God’s movement to reconcile creation to himself through Jesus Christ. So, the political common good is infused with eschatological significance while subordinated to the eschatological kingdom of God. However, it remains the case that secular politics can never measure up to this kind of responsiveness to prophecy, because of structural limitations. Even the church can only embody this kind of “organic democracy” imperfectly, if at all. Juan Luis Segundo is correct to argue that the church is not different in terms of its unique holiness or political radicalism, but simply in its being conscious of the activity of the Spirit in history.<sup>426</sup>

For Jenson, while Christians believe that the church participates, by means of anticipating, the eschatological body of Christ, the kingdom of God, it remains a pilgrim community.<sup>427</sup> The church shares with other polities that are not the church the same eschatological destiny. The church should be considered, as Williams often suggests, “God’s pilot project.”<sup>428</sup> In other words, the calling of the church is to embody humanity as it ought to be under God. This calling, however, is not unique to the church even if the church alone is explicitly aware of this calling. The political community that the church shares with others is also called to move towards that eschatological kingdom of God, by bearing witness to God’s justice

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<sup>426</sup> Segundo, *A Community Called Church*, 1:24–32.

<sup>427</sup> For Jenson, the church is the “people of God only” by anticipation. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God*, 172.

<sup>428</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Church: God’s Pilot Project,” April 5, 2006, accessed March 5th, 2018, <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1779/the-church-gods-pilot-project>.

in a penultimate way. The hope is the identity of society and church in the kingdom of God. This is why the church and society are, for Jenson, not two realities, but one reality that is for the time being internally differentiated.<sup>429</sup>

This internal relationship between church and society implies that Christians should expect to see the movement of transcendence towards God in the world in the form of the pursuit of justice and a world that is more befitting of human dignity. As Karl Rahner compellingly argues, the categorical revelation of Christianity is true, then one should expect to discern the effects of transcendental revelation operative in secular history as well.<sup>430</sup> Christians should, therefore, see society as a good in itself—like the church is—and is likewise on the way to something that transcends them both. To be a Christian is to be a member of the church that actively pursues the political common good of the larger society because the church and society are not two different goods, but parts of a single good in relation to the eschatological good.

In the next chapter, the relationship of the political good and the church as a good in itself will be further developed, noting that Christian life and political life are internally related.<sup>431</sup> But for now, it suffices to say that the identity of the church is not separable from the larger society to which it belongs. This is not because the church is merely a servant of the political good or that it is subservient to the state, but merely the recognition that the church anticipates the sublation of the church and political society by the kingdom of God. The good of society is internal to the church and the good of the church is internal to society. With this Trinitarian model of the common good flushed out, this dissertation can move on to discuss, in more depth,

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<sup>429</sup> Jenson, “The Triunity of Common Good,” 344.

<sup>430</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 138–46.

<sup>431</sup> Romans 13:1-7

what the political mission of the church is in liberal societies. In addition, it is necessary to spell out, in more detail, how the good of the church is internally related to the larger society that it is a part of in a liberal society.

## Chapter 4: Liberating the Theology of the Common Good

### Introduction

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, two conflicting approaches to social ethics predominate in Protestant social ethics. One approach focuses on the need of the socio-analytical mediation. José Míguez Bonino's and Clodovis Boff's works embody this approach. It attempts to bring the Christian narrative together with existing political struggles through a rigorous scientific analysis of society. According to Bonino and Boff, it is impossible to move from Christianity to political praxis without the mediation of social theory. Critics of this approach points out that the risk of this approach is that political theology is reduced to the role of uncritically authorizing Christians to participate in secular political struggles.

Closely connected to this criticism is the fear that liberation theology inevitably imports the metaphysical assumptions of secular social theory back into Christianity, thus silencing Christianity's unique contribution to an understanding of the social reality grounded on theological assumptions. This way of conceiving Christian political ethics can, thus, be lumped in with the approaches of liberal theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr for supposedly undermining the integrity of Christian faith.<sup>432</sup> On the other hand, those who notice the problem of liberal ethics and proceed to proclaim the uniqueness of the church, most notably Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, tend to reduce political ethics to ecclesiology, giving the impression that the church and secular society are radically opposed. This leaves very little room for Christians to cooperate with non-Christians in common struggles for the common

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<sup>432</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 69; Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 55–58; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 207.



good and, as this chapter will show, distorts ecclesiology itself, by reifying the church as a self-contained political community.

As things stand, the two positions seem irreconcilable. This chapter argues that a theology of the common good is precisely what is needed to reconcile the fragmentary effect of this debate social ethics today. What needs to be clarified is the relationship between the church and the larger society as internally related goods before the eschaton. The thesis of this chapter is that the integrity of the church's proclamation embodiment the Gospel is contingent upon the struggle for the political common good. Conversely, the common good of political society depends on the church's proclamation and embodiment of the Gospel. I begin by discussing Hauerwas' suspicions towards theologies that emphasize common political struggles with non-Christians. After showing the limitations of Hauerwas' position, I move on to the works of Bonino, Joerg Rieger, and Kathryn Tanner to provide a better account of the church's relationship to the larger political society. I end by showing how a theology of the common good could do justice to both Christian particularity and the call to struggle against institutions of injustice.

## I. On Hauerwas' Attempt to Keep Social Ethics Theological

Hauerwas is, to say the least, well known for being deeply suspicious of any theological ethics that speaks of a general morality or social ethics Christians share with non-Christians. He writes, "Surely in social ethics we should downplay the distinctively Christian and emphasize that we are all people of good will as we seek to work for a more peaceable and just world for

everyone. Yet that is exactly what I am suggesting we should not do.”<sup>433</sup> For Hauerwas, the primary task of the church is to “be the church.”<sup>434</sup> By being the church, Hauerwas does not simply mean that Christians should attend church regularly. Rather, being the church, for Hauerwas, entails the difficult task of becoming a community of servants that live out the kingdom principles of Jesus in the world. “As such,” Hauerwas claims, “the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.”<sup>435</sup> The social mission of the church, then, is the making of a sanctified kingdom people, who gives witness to God by the way they embody a different way of life, a life of non-violence. Current social ethics’ preoccupation with justice, therefore, undermines the church’s unique ethics by making ethical reflections goal oriented, instead of character forming: “Christian ethicists accepted an account of the social good that failed to manifest the struggle and the transformation of the self necessary for any adequate account of the moral life.”<sup>436</sup>

For Hauerwas, the church’s first task cannot be to make the world a better place, because the church has fundamentally different ethical standards and tasks from the secular order. Therefore, unless the world is ready to see the world the way the church sees it, there would be little overlap between the politics of the church and the politics of the world. For him “it is from the church that Christian ethics draws its substance and it is to the church that Christian ethical reflection is first addressed. Christian ethics is not written for everyone, but for those who have been formed by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus.”<sup>437</sup> This is the basis of Hauerwas’

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<sup>433</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

<sup>434</sup> Hauerwas, 99.

<sup>435</sup> Hauerwas, 99.

<sup>436</sup> Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological,” 70.

<sup>437</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 97.

rejection of ethics based on Enlightenment universalism or the notion of “people of good will” as in the Catholic social tradition. The particularity of the church is important for Hauerwas because the Christian narrative offers a unique perspective of reality. The non-Christians, for one, do not understand themselves to be sinners who are in need of God’s redemption.<sup>438</sup> They also do not anticipate the eschatological coming of the peaceable kingdom of God. Therefore, for Hauerwas, non-Christians cannot understand the demands of Christian discipleship, which is to renounce the will to control the outcome of history and to trust in God’s faithfulness.<sup>439</sup> Since Christians follow a different narrative about reality, they must also have an alternative ethics.<sup>440</sup>

The church exists, according to Hauerwas, to point to the kingdom of God on earth. Hauerwas claims that without the church doing her job, the world would never know of its irrationality and violence. Thus, for him, the church should fiction, primarily, like contrast community that exposes the injustice and violence of the world for what they are.<sup>441</sup> Faithful to his MacIntyrean account of moral traditions, he believes that violence and injustice can only appear to be what they are in light of a tradition or worldview that provides an account of what violence and injustice are.<sup>442</sup> This is why Hauerwas claims that the church “helps the world understand what it means to be the world.”<sup>443</sup> If the mission of the church is to embody an

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<sup>438</sup> Hauerwas, 31–33.

<sup>439</sup> Hauerwas, “The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics,” 381.

<sup>440</sup> This echoes Milbank position that God’s economy of social salvation embodied by the church makes the church itself a sort of “universal society.” Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 227–28.

<sup>441</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 100.

<sup>442</sup> Hauerwas accepts MacIntyre’s view that we now live in a morally fragmented world that is beyond repair. He also accepts that the solution is to reclaim a tradition capable of making sense of moral life after the collapse of modernity. Jeffrey Stout has compellingly responded to this line of criticism against what Hauerwas calls liberalism. Hauerwas, 4–6; Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 122–39.

<sup>443</sup> Hauerwas, “The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics,” 375.

alternative vision of the world and, therefore, social life, then its first task is to ensure its integrity and uniqueness.<sup>444</sup> After all, how can the church be a contrast if it is not unique in some way? So, one of Hauerwas' fundamental theological commitment is Christian integrity. In a similar vein, John Milbank criticizes theologians of liberation for following Karl Rahner's strategy, which is to "naturalize the supernatural," that is, to allow non-Christians ideas of society to dictate Christian social ethics.<sup>445</sup> This strategy, for Milbank, robs the church of its ability to bear witness to its unique social vision.

Hauerwas sees the same proclivities in Catholicism's use of the natural law or appeals to "human" values without reference to the Christian tradition.<sup>446</sup> One of the primary assumptions of natural law is that human beings have natural knowledge of the good (and by implication, God), even if imperfectly, and that nature is not fundamentally corrupted. This makes Hauerwas uncomfortable because he thinks it makes the Christian narrative simply a tool for human beings to be whatever they already are: "Such a position is bound to use Christ to underwrite the integrity of the 'natural,' since he is seen as epitomizing the fulfillment of the human vocation."<sup>447</sup> Therefore, the Catholic natural law tradition compromises the uniqueness of Christianity. By extension, Hauerwas thinks natural law threatens the Christian narrative. D. Stephen Long, a former student of Hauerwas, makes a similar critique against Christians wedding theology to secular social theory. For Long, once the autonomy of the social realm is

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<sup>444</sup> I borrow Robin Lovin's word, integrity, here, denoting one of the four theological and ethical variations upon the "Christian stance" that focuses on the particularity and uniqueness of the Christian tradition (in contrast, to say, "synergy" which downplays Christian distinctiveness for the sake of cooperating with non-Christians for the common good). Robin W. Lovin, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 50–55.

<sup>445</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 224.

<sup>446</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 60.

<sup>447</sup> Hauerwas, 56.

affirmed, it would be possible to justify any secular ideology. Like Milbank, Long also suggests that theologians allow the social practices of the church and its internal logic to dictate the content of social ethics.<sup>448</sup>

Yet, curiously enough, Hauerwas wants to say that the church can help the world “recognize” its sinfulness, violence, and arbitrariness.<sup>449</sup> If only those who are already formed by the Christian narrative can recognize the truth about reality, why does Hauerwas expect that church’s witnessing can be effective at all? How would the world even recognize the church as a better option unless there is something already latent in human beings that cry out for God or justice? Hauerwas’ wishes that the world would be receptive to the gospel and yet it is just such receptivity that he fears in the Catholic position. Jean Porter makes a similar point regarding Hauerwas’ claim that the Christian narrative reflects the true nature of reality:

Hauerwas does sometimes seem to imply, and more so in his more recent writings, that the central narratives of the church are true in the sense of somehow convening the actual character of reality. But if that is what he means, then it would seem to follow that, potentially at least, there are standards for evaluating Christian ethics that is not purely internal to the Christian tradition.<sup>450</sup>

Hauerwas, of course, does not deny that the world is God’s creation or that human beings might have natural knowledge of God and the good. But he would insist that it is only from within the Christian narrative that we are able to make sense of these claims. Even if non-Christians might be receptive to the Christian narrative, it is only after they accept the Christian narrative that they

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<sup>448</sup> The problem, as Long sees it, is that contemporary social ethicists allows theology to only provide the values while looking to social theory to provide the “objective facts” or the solutions to economic problems conceived of in the terms of secular economists. Long, *Divine Economy*, 3–5.

<sup>449</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 100.

<sup>450</sup> Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 31.

can retrospectively understand their original craving for God as part of their God-given human nature.

True as this may be, nevertheless, there seems to be some basis in Christians believing in a common human nature that might give rise to legitimate social struggles when it is not respected and nourished, even if that nature is subjected to a myriad of historically contingent interpretations. Lisa Sowle Cahill, for instance, argues that the general recognition of human needs and the basic goods that meet them is the basis of anyone's ability (including the Biblical authors') to be able to recognize exploitation and opportunities for solidarity.<sup>451</sup> It seems Hauerwas should not, at least in theory, reject an explicitly theological understanding of the natural law or other positions that highlights possible—to borrow a term from Gadamer—"fusion of horizons" between Christians and non-Christians.<sup>452</sup> But why is Hauerwas uncomfortable with it? More importantly, if human beings already crave for God, why should secular politics be any less receptive to divine justice? Hauerwas does not give a satisfactory answer to the former question, but he does address the latter.

When contrasting John Howard Yoder and McDonagh's position, Hauerwas makes a revealing comment: "Once justice is made a criterion of Christian social strategy, it can too easily take on a meaning and life of its own that is not informed by the Christian's fundamental convictions. It can, for example, be used to justify the Christian resort to violence to secure a more 'relative justice.' But then we must ask if this is, in fact, the justice we are to seek as

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<sup>451</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Theological Ethics, the Churches, and Global Politics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 3 (September 2007): 384–85.

<sup>452</sup> Gadamer speaks of the "fusion of horizons" as when different social, cultural, and linguistic worlds come into contact with one another in mutual understanding (though not necessarily agreement). Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 305.

Christians.”<sup>453</sup> In the end, Hauerwas does not deny that justice is an important Christian concern or that Christians should not seek the wellbeing of all people, but that the quest for justice, if Christians are not careful, might compromise the project of making a sanctified people of the kingdom. One of the ways Christians social ethicists, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, have done so is by relegating Jesus’ radical vision for of the kingdom of God outlined in the Sermon on the Mount to the sphere of personal ethics and, thus, robbing it of all political teeth.<sup>454</sup> For Hauerwas, the problem with justice is that it might compromise the Christian politics of being—as opposed to doing—and subordinate the integrity of gospel to penultimate pursuits.

Hauerwas’ concern for Christian integrity is behind his negative attitude towards theologies of liberation, as articulated by Latin American Catholic theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez. For instance, he accuses Gutiérrez for falling prey to the Enlightenment understanding of freedom. He writes, “[A]t times [Gutiérrez’s] account of liberation sounds far more like that of Kant and the Enlightenment than it does of the kingdom established by Christ.”<sup>455</sup> Hauerwas connects Gutiérrez’s understanding of liberation to Kant’s project of releasing humanity from their enslavement to outdated tradition and claims that the society Gutiérrez imagines is one made up of “autonomous individuals.”<sup>456</sup> Christian ethics, Hauerwas adds, is not about “a life free from suffering, but rather a life that freely suffers, that freely serves...”<sup>457</sup> Leaving aside how odd it is for Hauerwas to suggest that Gutiérrez, a democratic socialist, might be promoting individualism and to insinuate that Gutiérrez thinks freedom is to avoid suffering—rather than to

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<sup>453</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 112–13.

<sup>454</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 76–77.

<sup>455</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, 52.

<sup>456</sup> Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 53.

<sup>457</sup> Hauerwas, 53.

suffer precisely for the good of others—Hauerwas’ underlying fear is clear: the pursuit of justice might cause Christians to abandon their particular mission of being a different kind of people. Working for justice, then poses a double threat of compromising the church’s epistemological (accountability to its theological tradition) as well as moral integrity.

Hauerwas’ worry is not entirely misplaced. In fact, Christians should heed Hauerwas’ warnings and be more critical toward secular movements for justice as not everything considered to be just should be considered just by Christians.<sup>458</sup> Hauerwas does not finally rule out the possibility of Christians struggling for social reform. Rather, he cautions that such activities could be easily captured by the dominant political and nationalist ideologies. Critiquing the rampant nationalism of American Protestant Christians, he writes that the “habit of thought, which Yoder calls Constantinianism, must be given up.”<sup>459</sup> “Otherwise,” he continues, “[Christians will] remain caught in the same habits of thought and behavior that implicitly or explicitly assume that insofar as America is a democracy, she is Christian.”<sup>460</sup> Here, Hauerwas is right to caution Christians against confusing Christianity with the agenda of a particular nation or a political system. So, he correctly emphasizes that a Christian’s allegiance to a politic society must be relativized in relation to his allegiance to the kingdom of God.

It is important to note that Hauerwas’s critique of secular politics is primarily grounded in Yoder’s well-known Anabaptist critique of Constantinianism, which assumes a theological position that is radically suspicious towards governmental authority and institutions. Constantinianism is the idea that Christians political responsibility entails the shaping or

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<sup>458</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, 68.

<sup>459</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “A Christian Critique of Christian America,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 476.

<sup>460</sup> Hauerwas, 476.



reforming of current political institutions. For Yoder, political authorities as supported by the use of force belongs to the “old aeon” of the world that is passing away.<sup>461</sup> There is, thus, nothing Christian about the way governments functions.<sup>462</sup> The government is, after all, routinely engaged in acts of force and lethal violence that is antithetical to the Christian gospel of nonviolence. Therefore, Yoder believes that the task of the church is to model a different kind of community that indirectly affects the society at large through a “leavening effect” by which “Christianized morality” might “seep” into the world.<sup>463</sup> On the other hand, Yoder does recognize that secular government has a providential role to play before the eschaton—as channeled evil—and so he thinks it appropriate for Christians to bear occasional witness to the state.<sup>464</sup> However, Christian activism should, for him, only involve symbolic gestures and not acts that would actually put pressure on the government to change its policies, even nonviolent pressure.<sup>465</sup> It is safe to assume that Yoder does not see any kind of positive engagement with governmental affairs to be worthy of Christian discipleship.

Hauerwas does not seem to take as strong a position as Yoder. Still, Hauerwas gives almost no positive reason why anyone should pursue the political common good or even why doing so could be essential to Christian integrity and faithfulness. Hauerwas’ theological imagination does not seem to leave room for such activities. Although his hostility toward political cooperation with non-Christians has relaxed over the years, due perhaps to his

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<sup>461</sup> Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 77.

<sup>462</sup> Another contemporary disciple of Yoder believes that the governing authorities operate under “demonic” power. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 20–26.

<sup>463</sup> Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 79.

<sup>464</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 12–13.

<sup>465</sup> Yoder, 54–55.

conversations with Romand Coles, the basic contour of his theology remains the same.<sup>466</sup> So in the end, while Hauerwas is right to correct the liberal exclusive preoccupation with justice, his theology is unable to provide a Christian account of the common good. As a result, his position can offer little guidance as to what Christians should do in the current political situation, especially when the church is confronting a society divided by growing economic inequality, cultural fragmentation, and xenophobia. Christians now, as always, face common concerns with other members of society that require modes of political engagement that seems to overwhelm the relatively socially insulated “leaven” approach advocated by both Hauerwas and Yoder.

Oliver O’Donovan’s understanding of (secular) government is more balanced and plausible. Among the theological critics of Hauerwas and Yoder, Oliver O’Donovan is perhaps one of the most compelling, because he shares, with them, a commitment to Christian particularity. In addition, different from other critics, O’Donovan does not believe Hauerwas’ position is sectarian or irresponsible.<sup>467</sup> Rather, O’Donovan questions Yoder’s and, by extension, Hauerwas’ understanding of secular government on theological grounds. Unlike Gregory A. Boyd and Yoder, O’Donovan does not consider government to be completely demonic.<sup>468</sup> After closely engaging with the Christian scriptures, including the Old Testament, O’Donovan

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<sup>466</sup> Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radically Ordinary*; Stanley Hauerwas, “Can Democracy Be Christian? Reflections on How To (Not) Be a Political Theologian,” ABC Religion and Ethics, June 24, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/06/24/4032239.htm>.

<sup>467</sup> James Gustafson famously accused Hauerwas and other post-liberals for being “sectarians.” Gary Dorrien, on the other hand, believes Hauerwas’ position is a form of Christian “isolationism.” James Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,” *Proceedings of The Catholic Theological Society* 40 (1985): 83–94; Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 357–61.

<sup>468</sup> Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, 20–26.

concludes that the role of the government is the enactment of judgment.<sup>469</sup> By judgment, O'Donovan means the “enactment of right against wrong,” which secures the possibility of social communication.<sup>470</sup> By communication, O'Donovan does not mean conveying information. Rather, he means “hold some things in common,” to engage in various social discourse and exchanges as a community.<sup>471</sup> Being inevitably social, human beings can only be free or flourish if they are empowered by their life together to acquire and express their social identity. Political authority, then, is tasked, before the eschaton to protect and defend the sphere of social communication or the common good, so that human community can be possible in a fallen world.

Government, therefore, is not simply evil being channeled against evil, as for Yoder, but has a positive contribution to make to create the space for social freedom and thus the work of social redemption by the church's ministry. O'Donovan is aware the New Testament contains strong criticisms of governmental powers. However, he reads texts such as Revelation as posing two possibilities for governmental authorities: subjection to Christ and recognize that the role of government—which will pass away in the eschaton—is judgment or become an idolatrous, oppressive imperial power that confuses itself with God's sovereign authority.<sup>472</sup> The role of Christians is to advocate for the former in their evangelical activities. Thus, O'Donovan believes Yoder's overly negative view of government is not the only possible reading of New Testament authors, such as Paul, who ask Christians to be subject to governing authorities “as a matter of

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<sup>469</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146–48. This idea will be further developed in the next chapter.

<sup>470</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 5.

<sup>471</sup> O'Donovan, 242.

<sup>472</sup> O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 156–57.

principled conviction.”<sup>473</sup> Rather, O’Donovan thinks that precisely because governmental authorities are subjected to Christ after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, there is now room to perform prophetic political criticism and to remind government of its role in righting wrongs.<sup>474</sup>

Hauerwas’ view of government is, in comparison, quite underdeveloped in relation to the rich resources offered by scripture and the Christian political tradition. His strict Yoderian stance also prevents him from seeing government in a more positive light as a possible site of mission: Christian witnessing includes prophetically calling governments to fulfill their own vocation, which is set out by God through Jesus Christ, as the Old Testament prophets often held the kings accountable to their exercise of justice.

## II. Liberation Theology Reconsidered

There is another issue raised by Hauerwas’ ecclesiology: his sharp dualism of the church and society. This is not to suggest that there is no distinction between the church and the world. Rather, the rigidity of Hauerwas’ position (like Milbank’s) is the way the church is construed in a way that makes it seem that it is culturally and socially insulated from society at large. Of course, Hauerwas recognizes that the church cannot be isolated from the world and might even learn from the world.<sup>475</sup> However, his primary vision remains that the social space that the church occupies is perceived as bounded or “internally consistent wholes,” accountable to a theological narrative that is not itself subject to the interpretation of people who are formed by

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<sup>473</sup> O’Donovan, 151.

<sup>474</sup> O’Donovan, 150–51.

<sup>475</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 100.

larger social forces.<sup>476</sup> Hauerwas does grant that the boundary between the church and the world is porous and that the kingdom of God transcends the boundaries of the physical Christian community, yet how the Christian narrative (in the singular) is understood and embodied seems to only have a one way relationship with the world.<sup>477</sup> While the church can bear witness to the world about the kingdom of God, the church—and the narrative that structures it—is not essentially dependent on the larger social world within which it is situated.

What is at stake goes far beyond the acknowledge that Christianity is always incarnated with materials “borrowed” from the existing cultures that nourish it.<sup>478</sup> In addition to the fact that Christian identity is always formed at the boundary of the church and the world, the socio-political divisions of the world also run through the church.<sup>479</sup> For instance, when a church baptizes a man from a patriarchal society into the church, the power dynamics of society does not simply get left behind. In fact, even if he is sensitive to the reality of patriarchy in the context of Christian fellowship, the social location he happens to occupy in relation to women in the congregation is not thereby abolished. There are forces that bear on the church that are neither in the control of the church as an institution nor that of a Christian as an individual. In fact, unless the church consciously acknowledges and resists the pressure of these social forces, they will inevitably come to determine the character of the church, just as slavery has defined how

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<sup>476</sup> Hauerwas writes, “The church does not let the world set its agenda about what constitutes a ‘social ethic’ but a church of peace and justice must set its own agenda.” Postmodern social theories, however, have challenged the possibility of conceiving of human culture as bounded consistent wholes. Hauerwas, 100; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 42–45.

<sup>477</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 101.

<sup>478</sup> Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 114–15.

<sup>479</sup> Tanner, 115.

Christians worshiped in the United States. After all, the church is just one node within larger fields of social intercourse.

That the church cannot insulate itself from larger fields of social communication means that the church does not have an autonomous (in the sense of completely unique, pure, and original) understanding of its beliefs or how it should incarnate them.<sup>480</sup> The true meaning of scriptures, traditions, doctrines, and rituals are also not given simply in themselves. Rather, an adequate understanding of what Christian beliefs mean and what they demand of Christians can only be worked out by engaging with the political fault lines that run through church and society alike as well as the ideas that come from other traditions of philosophical reflection.

One might suggest that to admit that the church is just a node within larger fields of social communication supports the Enlightenment narrative that the church is merely one private member of civil society among others.<sup>481</sup> There is certainly merit to this concern. Christians should resist the privatization of the church and instead be awakened to the public dimensions of worship. Still, the church does not constitute the entirety of a Christian's social existence. It is going too far to suggest that the church is a political society in its own right, if by political society, we mean some like England as a territorial political society that exists under one coordinated political authority. Christians should, therefore acknowledge that they should "seek the welfare of the city," because "in its welfare" they will find their welfare.<sup>482</sup> The welfare of Christians is inextricably bound with the larger society.

No theological movement has argued this point more forcefully than the various theologies of liberation. Among contemporary liberation theologians, Joerg Rieger is one the

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<sup>480</sup> Tanner, 105–7.

<sup>481</sup> Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 55–62.

<sup>482</sup> Jeremiah 29:7

most thorough in critiquing the various postliberal or postmodern theologies that espouse an insulated picture of ecclesial life and theological reflection. For Rieger, the postliberal turn to the church and the texts of the church—such as the Bible and the traditions of theological reflection—constitutes a genuine advance in theology. Rather than the liberal obsession with the human subject and private religious experience, postliberalism makes the texts of the church the locus of theological authority and reflection.<sup>483</sup> According to Rieger, liberalism’s blindness arises from its failure to see that the subjective “religious experience” to which theology is supposedly accountable is itself socially constituted.<sup>484</sup> Liberal theology thereby reflects the self-consciousness of upper “middle class,” North-Americans.<sup>485</sup> By moving theology away from the liberal “self” to the texts of the Christian tradition, postliberal theology relativizes its subjective concerns and interests.<sup>486</sup> This gives theology a chance to challenge prevailing attitudes and truisms.

However, postliberalism places too much confidence in the text’s ability to maintain the integrity of God’s revelation on its own. Rieger argues that God, in postliberalism, is closely identified with the texts and traditions of particular churches in a way that Karl Barth would have

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<sup>483</sup> Seminal figures in postliberal theology include George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. No doubt, Rieger would put Hauerwas into this camp as well. Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 74–75.

<sup>484</sup> Rieger identifies Schleiermacher, Tillich, as well as those in the social gospel movement as belonging in the “liberal” camp. Rieger, 19–21.

<sup>485</sup> Perhaps, this is unfair to theologians of the social gospel movement, as many of them—such as Walter Rauschenbusch—also experienced the rampant poverty generated by the industrial revolution. However, one could still argue that their social optimism and lack of awareness of racial inequality is the result of the movement’s inability to shed its bondage to the liberal concern with the experience of white North Americans. Rieger, 20; Walter Rauschenbusch and Paul Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke Up the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 177–230.

<sup>486</sup> Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, 78–79.

found quite problematic.<sup>487</sup> Rieger points out that the text itself is, as postliberals recognize, interpreted in community. But ecclesial communities themselves are easily captured by prevailing power structures and ideologies.<sup>488</sup> The conquest of Latin America, the oppression of women, and the Crusades of the Middle Ages were all “sanctioned by” the church’s texts and tradition at various moments of its history.<sup>489</sup> Postliberals, therefore, tend to flatten scripture and tradition, ignoring that there could be “powerful interests at work between the lines of the text” that “affect and shape the texts and the language of the church.”<sup>490</sup>

Rieger points out that Lindbeck himself is not free from political biases. The turn to the text is itself generated by a culture that is mourning the loss of identity and tradition. According to Rieger, Lindbeck himself is concerned about the revitalization of Western civilization by reclaiming classic Western texts.<sup>491</sup> However, such projects that attempt to revitalize culture by claiming its past can easily slide into a complacent attitude of suspicion towards the others as well as the marginalization of traditions that do not fit the “Western” mainstream, such as the Black Church and Latin American social traditions.<sup>492</sup> Rieger is concerned that postliberalism could trade liberal subjectivism with “collective narcissism.”<sup>493</sup> Postliberalism is, therefore, not sufficiently sensitive that the church itself could perpetuate structures of injustice and

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<sup>487</sup> Rieger, 79.

<sup>488</sup> Rieger argues that theologians who rejected the liberal self in favor of the text of the church should remember that Barth rejected both the idea that theology should be based on the modern understanding of the self as well as that the truth is unproblematically found in the texts of the church. See Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge of Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 29–30.

<sup>489</sup> Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, 80.

<sup>490</sup> Rieger, 88.

<sup>491</sup> Rieger, 90–91.

<sup>492</sup> Rieger, 89.

<sup>493</sup> Rieger, 94.



exclusion.<sup>494</sup> Postliberalism could, therefore, foster an inward-looking posture that ignores the church's own complicity in propping up the status-quo.<sup>495</sup> Again, the point is that the texts and traditions of the church are themselves generated and appropriate by people who occupy a specific social location that blinds them to the suffering of others.

This brings Rieger to posit that theology should move beyond even the dialectical tension between the self and the text. A third dimension needs to break into theology in order for the church to remain faithful to God's revelation. The manner in which the self relates to the texts and traditions of the church is defined by how the self and the tradition is related to the "other," that is, the people who exist on the margins of society.<sup>496</sup> The self, community, text, and tradition need to be confronted by human suffering and alienation. This is how Rieger interprets the relationship between the love of God and the love of neighbor.<sup>497</sup> True love and knowledge of God can be gained not only by engaging with tradition, but with the suffering neighbor. To know God is not only to listen to tradition, it is to be engaged with the suffering and struggles of the other.<sup>498</sup> This confrontation with the other breaks the liberal self and tradition open and enables Christians to truly perceive the active presence of God among the "least of these."<sup>499</sup> Of course, to appeal to the other is not to dethrone the proper place of scripture and tradition. The need to listen to the other is itself a command of scripture. But the only way to hear scripture

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<sup>494</sup> Rieger, 95.

<sup>495</sup> Rieger, *Remember the Poor*, 41.

<sup>496</sup> Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, 99–100.

<sup>497</sup> Rieger, 101, 191.

<sup>498</sup> James Cone argued this point quite compellingly. A prior "decision" for the oppressed is necessary for hearing the gospel of liberation. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 47–49.

<sup>499</sup> Matthew 25:40

authentically is by listening to scripture in light of the experience of the other. Rieger's is a self-critical hermeneutical circle.<sup>500</sup>

This engagement with scripture and tradition through the other disrupts narrow theological horizons and reorient theology to reflect the concern of those who are marginalized. It is here that theology must make use of the social sciences in order to understand the predicament of the oppressed.<sup>501</sup> This is not to allow the social sciences to dictate theological norms.<sup>502</sup> Rather, by appealing to the social sciences, liberation theologians are simply acknowledging that theology itself cannot produce an empirical understanding of social relations in question on its own.<sup>503</sup> The choice of scientific theories is not arbitrary. Rather, theories are chosen based on their ability to illuminate the predicament of the other as well as to enable them to reflect on their political activism. So "listening" to the other entails more than an act of intellectual understanding. Listening must also lead to political action in solidarity with the other. This practical engagement for the sake of transforming reality liberation theologians call praxis.

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<sup>500</sup> Merold Westphal argues, borrowing from Levinas, that it is the Bible that reveals how important to listen to the others and to find, in them, the site of divine revelation. Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 155.

<sup>501</sup> Rieger, *Remember the Poor*, 150–51.

<sup>502</sup> Daniel Izuzquiza shows that the charge, made by John Milbank, that liberation theology allows secular science to determine theological categories is really a caricature. Daniel Izuzquiza, *Rooted in Jesus Christ: Toward a Radical Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 53–57.

<sup>503</sup> It is here that I find Daniel Bell's distinction between theologies that begin with the political and theologies that interpret the political on its own terms to miss the point completely and not particularly helpful. This way of conceptualizing theology makes it too easy for postliberal theologians to dismiss feminist theologies, womanist theologies, and postcolonial theologies are using foreign categories to undermine the integrity of Christian theology. See Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "State and Civil Society," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 423–25.

Praxis or practical solidarity with the other is intrinsically related to theological reflection. As argued above, theology itself needs to internalize the voice of the other in order to overcome blindness. Second, to encounter God in the other is also to be summoned to action. Rieger points out that the other is the site where God's presence resides. So, to recognize God's revelation in the other is also to participate in God's liberating action. Worship and works of love are two sides of the same coin.<sup>504</sup> Theology is not thereby reduced to an appendix of already established political ideologies. Liberation theologians like Clodovis Boff reject this reductionism and affirm the relative autonomy of theology.<sup>505</sup> For Boff, encountering the other does not negate or displace the internal logic of Christian belief (i.e., scripture, tradition, doctrines, and the creeds). However, it does shed new light on it and by providing theology with a determinate object of reflection.<sup>506</sup> Furthermore, as James Cone has shown, encountering the other can transform the hermeneutical lens through which theology is done and shape how Christian doctrines are understood and developed.<sup>507</sup> In other words, theology itself needs to be shocked out of its complacency from time to time.

God's ethical summon for Christians to stand in solidarity with the marginalized others propel Christians beyond the boundaries of the church. They are, thus, called to be politically engaged in a common space of social intercourse shared by both Christians and non-Christians. It is for this reason that Bonino states that "Christians, do not have a 'distinctive' politics."<sup>508</sup> When Christians enter this common space, they are part of a larger struggle for liberation that transcends, but does not negate their particularity. Like Hauerwas, Bonino is cautious to warn

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<sup>504</sup> Rieger, *Remember the Poor*, 216–18.

<sup>505</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 162–63.

<sup>506</sup> Boff, 167.

<sup>507</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 33–56.

<sup>508</sup> Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, 47.

that Christian political theology cannot simply be reduced to an ideological prop of existing social struggles. He explicitly rejects the idea that one can “build a theology of politics on the basis of secular political praxis alone,” because doing so would empty Christianity of its content and lead to a secular theology of “perfect incarnation.”<sup>509</sup> That is to say, theology would be dissolved into the secular.

In addition, Bonino argues that secular politics cannot “account for the peculiar perspective of faith,” and it could also create confusion about why Christians participate in political struggles.<sup>510</sup> This confusion results in Christians being unable to see how political praxis enriches and deepens their faith.<sup>511</sup> However, as Bonino points out, there is no material difference between general political praxis and Christian political praxis. If Christians engage in political activities, they are not doing something essentially different from non-Christians: they would be protesting, organizing, voting, and debating. But these activities are “qualified by the fact of being performed by a Christian.”<sup>512</sup> There is, one might say, a political “overlapping consensus” between Christians and non-Christians.

This alliance, however, must be responsibly formed. Since political praxis is about changing the world, it must be attentive to the empirical situation. Bonino states that, “ethical options are posed by reality.”<sup>513</sup> In other words, the given social reality determines the proper course of political action. But in order to determine what concrete reality offers, one needs social analysis. Social theory, therefore, fundamentally frames the conversation of what should count as realistic political praxis. For Bonino “to dream of ethical decisions outside this framework of

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<sup>509</sup> Bonino, 48.

<sup>510</sup> Bonino, 49.

<sup>511</sup> Bonino, 49.

<sup>512</sup> Bonino, 48.

<sup>513</sup> Bonino, 41.

reality is the illusion of moralism,” that is, the detachment of ethical reflection from objective material conditions.<sup>514</sup> Secular social theory, therefore, determines how one understands the problem of reality and offers plausible solutions. Since for Bonino, Christian theology cannot access “the realm of the political” directly, it must be mediated by social theory.<sup>515</sup>

It is the use of social theories in theologies of liberation that compels Hauerwas to lament that “many Christian ethicists became social scientists with a religious interest.”<sup>516</sup> But this is not a fair characterization. Without denying the importance of Christian formation or the particularities of the Christian narrative, one must still realize that political action or witness does not take place in a social vacuum or worse, in some imaginary reality dreamed up by theologians (this error Boff calls theologism).<sup>517</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson points out that because Christians and non-Christians share a common social context that overdetermines the character of Christian language, worship, and theology, they do not have the ability to invent a new language, or other new practices in isolation. For McClintock, Christian discourse and practice simply cannot be isolated from the material forces of production that it is a part.<sup>518</sup>

If the larger culture and its dominant forces of cultural production (i.e., the media, schools, and workplaces) support and perpetuate ideologies and social patterns of patriarchy, racism, and class conflict, the church is necessarily put in a situation of either having to consciously confront these things or allow them to determine the shape of ecclesial existence.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Bonino, 41.

<sup>515</sup> Bonino, 45.

<sup>516</sup> Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological,” 57.

<sup>517</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 26–27.

<sup>518</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Toward a Materialist Christian Social Criticism: Accommodation and Culture Reconsidered,” in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge, 1996), 55.

<sup>519</sup> Fulkerson, 53–54.

Since the social imaginary of the larger society precedes the church, it also, to a large extent, sets the terms of the church's political praxis. Theology and ecclesial practice, then, must be worked out in response to a common social space that is shared by both Christians and non-Christians: patriarchy outside the church is the same as patriarchy inside the church. If this is the case, then the language and activities of resistance must be developed in a way that is recognizable by more parties than Christians.<sup>520</sup> Thus, it is possible for Christians and non-Christians to share a space of political overlapping consensus. Christians and non-Christians, in fact, confront the same social problems in a shared space. This is true even if Christians have to worry about the integrity of the church in addition to larger social structures: the two are internally connected. To struggle for the church's integrity is to struggle against evil forces in society.

Some might feel uncomfortable with liberation theology's emphasis on the social context of theology and its defense of a close link between theory and praxis because it appears to rob theology of secure epistemological foundations. One such criticism comes from, again, Oliver O'Donovan. For O'Donovan, the epistemology of liberation theology lacks an "objective point of reference" in their theological framework and seems to exhibit a voluntarist flavor.<sup>521</sup> For him, liberation theology seems to collapse knowledge into praxis, such that any political agenda could potentially determine how the world is known, thereby reducing the act of knowing to an act of will: "Is knowledge by which human beings 'create the world and shape themselves' really knowledge any more or simply will?"<sup>522</sup> By collapsing practical reasoning and moral reflection, which takes account of the reality with which one is practically engaged, liberation theology

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<sup>520</sup> Fulkerson writes of a common "syntaxes of solidarity that can work in different imagined worlds." Fulkerson, 55.

<sup>521</sup> O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 12–13.

<sup>522</sup> O'Donovan, 13.

squeezes God out and political action “becomes the predetermining matrix for whatever God may say to us, ensuring that we hear nothing from him but the echo of our own practical energies.”<sup>523</sup> Leaving aside the preposterous suggestion that what Gutiérrez’ takes to be the “creation of a new humanity” is nothing more than an act of arbitrary will and not the creaturely participation in God’s act to renew all of creation, O’Donovan’s comment misses the point entirely.

For liberation theology, there is no text, tradition, or reason that stands above and behind the vicissitudes of history that could be appealed to as a safe and “objective” standard of moral judgment. Perhaps, O’Donovan embraces such foundationalism. Liberation theologians, rather, interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ as embodying a way of life that is open to the appearance of the other through the face of the suffering neighbor wherever she might be found. What scripture provide is not a set of “true concepts” that could be mined, though Christians certainly ought to derive concepts from the Bible in order to illuminate their political experience. Rather, what scripture provides is a kind of pedagogy, whereby God’s people are taught to welcome the presence of God in the oppressed and marginalized others in society. The discovery of the poor and marginalized calls into question the authority of the political arrangement. This calling into question does not necessarily imply “universal suspicion” or “unmasking” that leaves a Christian with nothing to stand on and no accountability to any political authority.<sup>524</sup> Political authority comes, rather, from the political system’s ability to attend to the needs of the weakest, neediest members with whom God is present.

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<sup>523</sup> O’Donovan, 14.

<sup>524</sup> O’Donovan, 10.

For liberation theology, moral judgment and knowledge about reality emerges precisely at the fissures and cracks of a social reality. It is by engaging with these fissures and cracks that the church can come to recognize revelation because human beings as “concrete totalities” cannot come into contact with the transcendent by escaping historical struggles. They are, by virtue of being socially and historically situated beings, already involved in these struggles and must choose to either “repent” and respond to the call of the other or embrace the (theological) blindness fostered by the status-quo. Therefore, praxis that transforms the world for the sake of the poor is the site where God’s voice can be heard.

### III. Liberating Theology of the Common Good

The last chapter has shown that promoting the common good is not only licit but required by the Christian gospel, because church and society both belong to a larger story of God’s redemption of creation through Christ by the power of the Spirit. It also argued that Christian spirituality cannot be severed from political praxis. Jenson’s model of a true political community as being open to God’s prophecy served as a model of the relationship between church and political society. This chapter moves the argument further by developing, in more detail, how church and society are internally related and mutually constituted by examining the contribution of liberation theologies. However, by doing so, this chapter also complicates Jenson’s picture of a political community as a community of moral discourse. What liberation theologies show is that the church cannot merely be a community of moral discourse as if moral discourse ever happens in morally monolithic communities that are not already divided by political conflicts. In this concluding section, therefore, the last chapter’s theological theory of the common good will be further developed using the insights of liberation theologies.



Disputing Jacques Maritain's dualist theological anthropology, chapter three shows that human beings are "concrete totalities" whose spirituality and sociality are intrinsically related. Just so, it is not helpful to speak of a spiritual human nature in abstract isolation from the material and social dimension of human existence. A human being's relationship with God is worked out in and through her social situation, which provides her with the material and horizon of moral action. Therefore, the liberation of human beings from sin and the unity of God and humanity is not achieved apart from social struggles any more than is faith realized without works of love. Following Jenson, Christian eschatology is better understood as the redemption of humanity in their sociality alongside the transfiguration of creation itself. The eschaton is, therefore, the state in which God will be "all in all."<sup>525</sup>

Within this theological framework, the good of the church and the good of political society are identical in the kingdom of God. Furthermore, it also implies that before the end, church and society are mutually dependent and implicated. The world is in the church and the church is in the world. Augustine argues that in the present state of things the "city of God" and the "city of man" are "commingled."<sup>526</sup> The city of God and the city of man differ in their "diverse faith, diverse hope, and diverse love," but they share the same historical predicament and enjoy the same common goods.<sup>527</sup> No theological movement has done more justice to this comingled relationship between the city of God, of which the church is a communal sign, and the human city.

The common goods that are shared between the church and the world create a common space between the church and political society. However, this common space is not only

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<sup>525</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>526</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, 1.

<sup>527</sup> St. Augustine, XVIII, 54.

saturated with moral conflicts, as in Jenson and MacIntyre, but also with power relations that tend to shut out the marginal others from the church and society's moral horizon. Therefore, the proper theological virtues of faith, hope, and love cannot be developed in isolation from social struggles because the power relationships of society overdetermine the meaning of the church's texts, traditions, and liturgy. If the liberal "self" of modernity is blind to it being implicated in social relations, any community supposedly formed by the texts, traditions, and practices of the church can also become collectively narcissistic and distorted by ideology. It follows then that an adequate conception of the common good must also be attentive to the voices of the marginalized.

However, the common good, as Rieger argues, is not always conceived of in a way that is sensitive to the claim of the poor and the powerless.<sup>528</sup> For instance, in political debates about the economy, the interests of corporations and the capitalist class is automatically understood to be the interest of everyone in society. Whereas, when the government meets the need of the poor, it is often interpreted as wasteful, irresponsible, or encouraging dependence.<sup>529</sup> Worse still, the difficult predicament of the poor, children, and the elderly are written off as a necessary sacrifice for the future good of society. Therefore, the simply recognizing that human beings can only flourish in society is not necessarily to acknowledge the "preferential option for the poor."<sup>530</sup>

Recognizing the ambivalence of the idea of the common good taken in the abstract, Rieger points out that the common good can be construed from the "top down" or from the

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<sup>528</sup> Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 54.

<sup>529</sup> Rieger, 54.

<sup>530</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxv–xxviii.

“bottom up.”<sup>531</sup> When the common good is defined from the top down, it becomes ideological like the so-called trickle-down economics. Thus construed, the common good is nothing other than the reflection of the sectional interest of the powerful in society. On the other hand, if the common good is understood from the bottom up, it would preferentially register the needs of the weakest members of society. In other words, the political common good of society ceases, in this model, to be an abstraction and can illuminate the (class, gender, and racial) conflicts and tensions that exist in a given society. This way the common good can help us understand that justice rather than the social harmony of the status-quo is the most important value.<sup>532</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of the common good is a compelling statement of a natural law theory of the common good developed, as it were, from the bottom up. MacIntyre does not begin his moral inquiry into the common good with an a priori theoretical conception of the good. Rather, for MacIntyre, the common good can only be discovered through practical rationality worked out in political praxis. For MacIntyre as well as Aquinas, human beings are by nature teleological creatures. That is, they pursue ends that they take to be goods. Following Aristotle and Aquinas, MacIntyre believes the unifying end of all human pursuits is happiness or flourishing. However, human beings have different ideas about what constitutes human flourishing. Since there are a diversity of possible ends human beings can and do pursue, it may at first seem impossible to affirm that human beings have a specifiable end. But, MacIntyre argues, human beings nonetheless have a particular nature or essence and a set of capacities that help to delineate what constitutes human flourishing: “humans are goal directed in virtue of their

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<sup>531</sup> Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 157.

<sup>532</sup> Rieger, 53.

recognition of good specific to their nature to be achieved.”<sup>533</sup> For instance, since human beings need food to survive and stay healthy, then a life of starvation cannot constitute a flourishing life.

MacIntyre points out that, unlike other animals, human beings are dependent on one another and cannot survive without deliberating about what constitutes human flourishing.<sup>534</sup> Therefore, MacIntyre argues, the pursuit of the good requires a community of people who are also competent practical reasoners.<sup>535</sup> Here it is important to keep in mind that practical rationality, for MacIntyre, can only function if the good also has the property of being true. The good must also be the true for it to be an object of rational inquiry. Yet, the good can still do moral work even if it is thus far undefined. “What should prompt us to undertake such self-question is precisely the discovery of disagreement with others as to whether this or that particular judgment or action, choice or project, is or what the best to undertake in this or that particular set of circumstances.”<sup>536</sup> For MacIntyre, the good is not to be dogmatically determined a priori, but by practice. It is by asking questions about the good that we begin to realize the content of the good.<sup>537</sup>

In order for there to be a community of practical reasoners, MacIntyre goes on to argue, certain conditions must be satisfied. For instance, members of the community cannot murder,

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<sup>533</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 23.

<sup>534</sup> MacIntyre, 66.

<sup>535</sup> Here MacIntyre quotes from Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, Q. 14, Art. 3. See Alasdair MacIntyre, “Intractable Moral Disagreements,” in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>536</sup> MacIntyre, 18.

<sup>537</sup> Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89–114; Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 236–42. MacIntyre’s understanding of practical rationality has clear Hegelian overtones. This leads to thinkers like Jeffrey Stout to wonder why MacIntyre never expresses his indebtedness to modernity and whether Aristotelianism is ultimately incompatible with the liberal democratic tradition.

coerce, deceive, or manipulate one another to achieve individual purposes, for doing so would compromise the community's ability to deliberate and achieve the common good. This requirement, according to MacIntyre, is precisely what the primary precepts of the Thomistic theory of the natural law require. Natural law, for MacIntyre, is simply the moral precepts, discovered by practical reason, that are necessary for the pursuit of the common good. Furthermore, the basic material conditions of flourishing, such as food, education, meaningful work, play, political equality, and economic justice are necessary for the rational deliberation about the common good.<sup>538</sup> If the community is radically unequal and are constantly bombarded by the falsehood which characterizes the modern advertisement industry and market economy, deliberation about the good would be polluted by private interests and arbitrary agendas.

In addition, MacIntyre believes that a community of virtuous people cannot only care about itself. Two of the necessary virtues of such a community, according to MacIntyre, are *misericordia* and *beneficentia*. They are the virtues of taking pity and doing good. MacIntyre rightly claims that a community cannot flourish if its members are not able to meet the urgent need of others regardless of who they are. One of the required virtues of such a community is solidarity beyond the boundary of the community.<sup>539</sup> The common good, therefore, must move beyond any particular community, such as a single church and school, since human flourishing necessarily involves social structures that are beyond the borders of our immediate communities. In addition, two of the most important virtues, *misericordia* and *beneficentia*, require the community that is committed to the common good to stand in solidarity with those who are in

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<sup>538</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 129–33.

<sup>539</sup> MacIntyre, 121–26.

urgent need. It follows that everyone committed to the common good must also fight to improve the conditions of the least advantaged people.

MacIntyre's account of the common good is remarkably egalitarian. One can detect a hint of the "preferential option for the poor" in it. It is true that a society cannot function without virtues of social solidarity. It is also true that discourse about the common good cannot take place without truthfulness and openness. However, one could argue that it does not necessarily follow that everyone's voice should be treated as equal. Why, for instance, should the intellectually deficient, physically dependent, and the weak be regarded as having equal moral weight as the intelligent, educated, and strong? Here is one area where an account of how the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is transcended in favor of reciprocal recognition might be helpful. Regardless, however, MacIntyre's larger point still stands. The purpose of society, on his account, is to create the basis of a good life, but this is only possible in a community of independent practical reasoners. A community of practical reasonings are, in turn, produced by society's commitment to honor that agency by acknowledging the dependent nature of all human beings, especially the weak.

The common good is, then, not simply a collection of particular social goods (e.g., hospitals, roads, schools, governments), but denotes the moral fabric of human social existence. To be more precise, the common good primarily refers to the kind of life that one shares with another in society. This is why Maritain argues, caring for the common good itself generates necessary human virtues such as "justice, friendship, happiness, virtue, and heroism."<sup>540</sup> David Hollenbach also points out that the common good is the "realization of the human capacity for intrinsically valuable relationships, not only a fulfillment of the needs and deficiencies of

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<sup>540</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 52.

individuals.”<sup>541</sup> So what kind of virtues and institutions society should invest in is based on a vision of a common purpose in society. Here, Christian theology provides resources to strengthen such bonds of solidarity and continue to criticize conceptions of the common good that is built from the top-down. Rieger, therefore, finds the theological inspiration for a Christian concept of the common good in the theological account of common life found in the writing of Paul and the prophets.

#### IV. Conclusion

Rieger finds, in Paul, the basis of a liberationist vision of the common good.<sup>542</sup> It is in the eschatological body of Christ that the social boundaries that divide people (their race, class, and gender) are transcended. For Paul, it was because God acted in a particular way in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, that these artificial barriers are eliminated. Paul’s vision is one that the fate of each member of the community is tied to that of others in the community—so much so that they are considered to be members of one physical body. In this theological vision, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”<sup>543</sup> He argues that unlike the Roman imperial model of human solidarity, which is thought to be from the top down, Paul identifies the common good with the good of those who suffer in the community. In other words, Paul’s model of the common good is a bottom up. Rieger then connects this vision with that of Jesus who not only criticizes a top-down model of power, but also promotes bottom-up power.<sup>544</sup> This is further supported by the

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<sup>541</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 81.

<sup>542</sup> Rieger here cites 1 Corinthians 12. Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 54.

<sup>543</sup> Rieger quotes 1 Corinthians 12:26. Rieger, 54.

<sup>544</sup> Rieger, 53, 80.

Hebrew prophets such as Amos, when they called for the lowly to be lifted up in the community.<sup>545</sup>

The essence of Christian moral anthropology is found in the idea that the oppressed other is already within each and every one. Rieger rightly states that the moral vision of the Bible is that “the neighbor is part of who we are.” This is a theological claim that dovetails nicely with MacIntyre’s account of the common good. Connecting this with the theological theory of the common good developed in the last chapter, it is plausible to say that because human beings are destined to enter into God’s triune life of God in Jesus, they can no longer see the fate of one as isolated from that of another. Therefore, if even one member is oppressed or neglected in the community, the community itself should be considered wounded and broken. Each individual should also feel that his or herself is wounded and broken and be prompted to action.

Furthermore, Christians and theologians should avoid fooling themselves by thinking that turning to the Bible, tradition, or ecclesial practices, they could zero in on truths about God apart from encounters with oppressed others. Social engagement, as liberation theologies teach, is intrinsic to discipleship. Insofar as political society—a common face both Christians and non-Christians share—bears indirect witness to the reign of God before the eschaton, Christians have a responsibility to work for the common good so that political institutions would better serve the needs of the poor and the weakest members, even if it means that those who are rich and powerful might have to make sacrifices. The common good, however, might be seen as coming into tension with political liberalism’s commitment to equality, religious freedom, and autonomy. Similarly, liberal commitments might be seen as undermining the particularities of

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<sup>545</sup> Rieger, 161. Here, Rieger quotes Amos 4:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:28.



Christian commitments. The relationship between Christianity, the common good, and liberalism is, therefore, the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: The Common Good and Liberalism

### Introduction

While postliberal political theologies—such as that of Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, William T. Cavanaugh, and D. Stephen Long—rightly emphasize the centrality of ecclesiology for a Christian understanding of the social, the previous chapter argued that it is a mistake to reduce the task of political theology to ecclesiology. Other Christian theologians also resisted this reductionism for doctrinal reasons. As Oliver O'Donovan states in *Desire of the Nations*, the mission of the church has two frontiers that are internally related but irreducible to one another.<sup>546</sup> On the one hand, the church is called to embody the reign of Christ by the power of the Spirit. So, in a qualified way, the church represents a political order under Christ in civil society. However, the church is political only by analogy. The church, as O'Donovan points out, “is not another member” of an international community of political states.<sup>547</sup> As chapters two and three showed, the church does not comprise the totality of political life, which includes a wider public realm.

The church, unlike nation-states, is not necessarily constituted by the rule of law or a common allegiance to a territorial authority. Rather, it's essential political nature is constituted by the “relation of its members to the ascended Christ.”<sup>548</sup> This means that the church as the body of Christ has a commitment that transcends worldly loyalties and attachments, including loyalty to political society. Because God, in Christ, directly constitutes the church as the church, it is technically not dependent on any external authority or structures to defend its internal integrity. Life under the direct reign of Christ is rightly the starting point of Christian political

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<sup>546</sup> O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 193.

<sup>547</sup> O'Donovan, 159.

<sup>548</sup> O'Donovan, 169.

theology. Yet, political theology must also recognize that secular authority also mediates God's universal rule insofar as creation is not yet fully liberated from evil. In other words, there remains, prior to the eschaton, a political life that transcends the boundaries of the confessional community and on which the community depends for its own wellbeing. The church, therefore, properly recognizes that there is a political authority that is tasked with executing penultimate justice without religious pretensions.<sup>549</sup>

In order to develop the meaning of Christian political engagement in support of the political common good both politics and the common good deserve further elaboration. The task of this chapter is to develop a theory of the public that delineates its scope and authority. Drawing from O'Donovan's and Dewey's works, it argues that the task of politics is the defense of the common good. In order to assuage possible worries of paternalism, this chapter then turns to feminist ethics of care. Feminist care ethics destabilizes the standard liberal dualism of the public and the private, in doing so it sheds light on why the common good as a political task is not necessarily paternalistic or illiberal. Lastly, it draws on the work of Martha Nussbaum to provide more actionable content to the ethical concept of the common good and to show that Christians need not abandon the broadly liberal framework of politics. In fact, Christians have positive reasons to support its best aspirations, despite the limitations of what Rowan Williams calls "programmatic liberalism," which is a form of ideological secular individualism.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> This is the basis of secular political authority in the broadly Augustinian tradition represented by O'Donovan, Rowan Williams, Charles Mathewes, and Eric Gregory. See Williams, *On Augustine*; Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*; Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 151.

<sup>550</sup> Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 2.

## I. John Dewey: The emergence of the public

*The Public and Its Problems* is John Dewey's mature statement in defense of the democratic form of government. It is the crystallization of his debates with detractors of democracy, such as Sir Henry Maine and Walter Lippmann, over the years. What is of interest in his theory to the task of this chapter is not Dewey's defense of democracy in light of the problems he faced in his time—problems such as mass media and the complexification of democratic governance due to globalization—but his discussion the emergence of the public. What is unique about Dewey's pragmatist stance in comparison to other liberal political theorists is that he explicitly rejects the social contract understanding of society and instead roots politics in the inevitably social character of human life. Therefore, it makes sense to turn to him to begin the task of describing the object of political reflection: the public and the material conditions that bring it into being.

Dewey is hostile to what he perceives as political theories that serve to legitimate political structures and institutions by appealing to some reified notion of human nature or other metaphysical causes. These metaphysical categories, rightly or wrongly for Dewey, include elements of Aristotelian, Hegelian, and contractarian anthropologies.<sup>551</sup> For Dewey, appeals to idealistic frameworks that seek to define human beings a priori—either as a political animal or a self-interested individual—and then apply them to political problems, at best, illuminate nothing and, at worst, occludes the nature of public life. Dewey thinks these theories are tautological, because they assume what needs to be explained, such as the claim that human beings engage in political activities, because they are political animals.<sup>552</sup> It is thus not surprising to Dewey that

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<sup>551</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 41–42.

<sup>552</sup> It is obviously quite easy to quarrel with Dewey's criticism of these political theorists: Aristotle's and Hegel's anthropologies are profoundly sensitive to history and the actual practice of politics. Thus, their anthropological claims are far from being tautologies. But his observation that fundamental political conceptions of human nature change depending on the circumstances

there are so many rival conceptions of political society: some see the political state as the fulfillment of human nature and others see it as the enemy of the individual.<sup>553</sup> What many of these elaborate metaphysical theories of politics often leave out, according to Dewey, is how human beings come to confront political problems in the first place.<sup>554</sup> So, in order to avoid getting caught in these metaphysical problems, Dewey thinks a philosophical examination of politics must begin with what human beings actually do.

Dewey's fundamental observation is that "human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others."<sup>555</sup> Human activities are such that most of what we do affect those who are not directly involved. When such activities produce grave consequences and are perceived to be negative, then others legitimately take an interest in them. Human activities generate a "people" with a shared stake in what is happening. "The public," Dewey states, "consists of all those who are affected by the [direct and] indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."<sup>556</sup> In addition, the emergence of consequences deemed necessary for collective intervention coincides with the emergence of public authorities tasked with addressing them as representatives of "common interests" of the public.<sup>557</sup>

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of history is well-taken. Still, it does not follow that there is no place for normative anthropology as this chapter will show. Dewey, 44.

<sup>553</sup> Dewey, 42.

<sup>554</sup> It should be recognized that although Dewey mentions many political theorists in many different traditions as targets of his criticism, his primary opponents are those who hold an atomized understanding of human life, which he takes to be false in virtue of the fact of human sociality.

<sup>555</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 46.

<sup>556</sup> Dewey, 48.

<sup>557</sup> Dewey, 49.

Against the individualists, in both the libertarian and contractarian camps, Dewey asserts that “there is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association.”<sup>558</sup> Couple the inevitably social character of human action with the fact that human behavior is always tradition and custom-bound, Dewey thinks there is no legitimate reason to deny that human existence is permeated with various forms of associations.<sup>559</sup> He, therefore, believes it is ludicrous that philosophers feel the need to postulate obscure metaphysical causes like “instincts, fiats of will,” or “social essence” in order to explain the intuitive fact of human beings live in and are accountable to associations.<sup>560</sup> Thus, Dewey believes it is superfluous to justify political associations as if it needs justification: people do not form a contract out of self-interest—or any other reason—in order to relate to one another socially. Certainly, Dewey can be rightly accused of misunderstanding some of these political traditions, because he is likewise, in his own way, providing an account of the social nature of human beings by observing what they actually do, not unlike the social thought of Aristotle or Hegel.<sup>561</sup>

Once the public comes into existence, because of the “extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them,” people organize themselves into “suitable structures” of “oversight and regulation.”<sup>562</sup> However, once organized, governing institutions have the tendency to become reified. For Dewey, the public should remain a fluid entity. The public always tends to exceed current institutional arrangements and regulations, because people form new associations and confront new problems beyond the

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<sup>558</sup> Dewey, 52.

<sup>559</sup> Dewey, 52.

<sup>560</sup> Dewey, 53.

<sup>561</sup> Judith A. Swanson and C. David Corbin, *Aristotle's Politics* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 11–12; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 182–83.

<sup>562</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 54–55.

boundaries of any actual government. Governing institutions are always contingent and philosophies that tend to justify the permanence of political forms or the boundaries of the public are, therefore, always ideological and serve only sectional interests.

Herein lies Dewey's contribution to political theory. For him, the public realm just names the common space within which human social intercourse happens. Politics happen because people face issues of common concern in the public realm. Legitimate political institutions do not need our explicit consent or justification to be legitimate, because people do not voluntarily choose the public problems they confront. Politics just happens and the political institutions to which we happen to be bound to will always be contingent, but this contingency does not mean arbitrary. Dewey is right that what constitutes the public good will differ depending on the historical context. Universal public education, for instance, might not have been necessary for people who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but it is now necessary for 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic and capitalist societies. However, while Dewey is correct to emphasize the contingency of political institutions and the boundaries of such associations—he is like the radical democrats in this way—he jumps too quickly from the recognition of common problems to the formation of common interest.

Dewey is aware that sectional and narrow interest groups exist in every political community: he gives some examples of dominant class interests and anti-democratic religious forces.<sup>563</sup> Yet, he gives no account of why narrow interests are bad other than the fact that it produces undesirable or unreasonable consequences.<sup>564</sup> Dewey seems to think selfishness can be overcome with sufficiently broad observations and imagination, but gives no account of what

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<sup>563</sup> Dewey, 56, 62.

<sup>564</sup> Dewey, 71.

counts as legitimate common interest or justice given the nature and purpose of public institutions. In this way, Dewey transcends the limits of the social contract theory only by leaving an ethical vacuum. He seems to hold the view that laws and political institutions merely serve instrumental rather than moral ends.<sup>565</sup>

Certainly, Dewey has moral values. He defends a democratic polity with a strong emphasis on equal regard and equality. This is especially apparent in his discussion of the dependent members of society and the powerless—such as children and workers.<sup>566</sup> But his unwillingness to engage in normative anthropology leave him with no ethical resources to deal with the problems his political theory generates. In other words, the problem is that his understanding of the public is untethered to his moral conceptions and so lacks normative content what could provide guidelines of political judgment. As will be discussed in dialogue with Nussbaum, political analysis can only yield moral concepts if moral concepts are built in from the get-go.<sup>567</sup> It is this problem that Oliver O'Donovan's account of political judgment can illuminate. His theory of authority as judgment is the object of investigation in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that if the public is the common space shared by people from different networks and communities, then a political theology of the common good has to make the public the object of investigation and not confine theological reflection merely to ecclesiology.

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<sup>565</sup> Dewey, 71.

<sup>566</sup> Dewey, 73–74.

<sup>567</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 57.



## II. Oliver O'Donovan: Judgment as the Defense of the Common Good

O'Donovan's understanding of the public converges with Dewey in a number of ways. Both agree, for instance, that human beings are inevitably social. Both agree that political institutions and the boundaries of the public are contingent. Significantly, they also believe that the task of public officials is to deal with threats against the public. However, O'Donovan is more sensitive to the fact that absent a moral concept of the common good and public authority, political theory cannot account for what actually happens in politics or delineate the scope and limits of public authority.<sup>568</sup> Furthermore, these moral concepts have to be rooted in particular moral or theological traditions. Like Dewey, O'Donovan's political theory is rooted in the examination of what human beings actually do. But he does not hold that the public only emerges due to some consequences deemed socially undesirable. This can be clarified only by understanding O'Donovan's fundamental concept: communication.

By communication, O'Donovan does not mean the conveying of information. Rather, he prefers the more ancient meaning of "holding things in common."<sup>569</sup> For O'Donovan, communication coincides with the emergence of community. He is critical of modern neo-liberal attempts to reduce human relationships to the logic of exchange.<sup>570</sup> In an economic exchange relationship, the two parties' benefits from the interaction, but then the interaction terminates once both gain something from it. If this logic is then uncritically applied to political theory, only atomistic individualism can result, and the true nature of human sociality is obscured. However,

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<sup>568</sup> One does not need to share O'Donovan's problematic views of the desirability of some kind of neo-Christendom arrangement—where the primacy of the church is institutionally acknowledged—in order to appreciate his understanding of politics as judgment or his understanding of the common good.

<sup>569</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 242.

<sup>570</sup> O'Donovan, 246.

as O'Donovan points out, even exchange depends on antecedent relations that do not follow the logic of exchange. A market place with concrete customs, laws, and relationships of trust is itself held in common between parties of commercial exchange. Thus, he writes that "In order to exchange our exclusive property, we must participate in what is not anyone's exclusive property."<sup>571</sup> For, O'Donovan, social communication is a more fundamental concept than exchange or self-interest.

Holding things in common, for O'Donovan, is ontologically basic for human beings. This is why, like Dewey, he rejects the idea that society is merely the aggregate of individuals. To act as a human being is to act together with others. Furthermore, there is still a deeper dimension to communication. To communicate—to share a meal, to sing in a choir, or to give a gift—takes place within a context of human meaning. Human activities are simultaneously signs and so appear to have not only instrumental value but "significance."<sup>572</sup> Every human activity contributes to the common goods they hold together and perpetuate or shape a culture.<sup>573</sup> So, communication has an intimate relationship with art and language. The worst attack on human dignity is, then, when a person is threatened with circumstances that would neutralize or diminish her ability to participate in social communication. As O'Donovan points out, there are many spheres of communication in a given society. People hold various things in common and pursue different kinds of work. A society is not something that is artificially constructed with an act of will, but simply the "coherence in which spheres of communication flourish in relation to each other."<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> O'Donovan, 247.

<sup>572</sup> O'Donovan, 250.

<sup>573</sup> O'Donovan, 251.

<sup>574</sup> O'Donovan, 253.

The various common goods come together to form a larger common good, which is the political community. Human beings do not live in a community called “humanity” in the abstract, but always realize who they are in concrete societies with “bounded spheres of communication.”<sup>575</sup> This is not to suggest that society is a harmonious or undifferentiated whole or that it is necessarily dependent on a monolithic language or culture—though something like common language, law, national purpose, or traditions are often necessary to hold the public together as a coherent unit.<sup>576</sup> Rather, society is simply the location where various fields communications form a larger differentiated whole, where “diversity cohere.”<sup>577</sup> O’Donovan thus believes society is merely one contingent locality among others where people hold things in common. This is a more complex definition of the public than Dewey’s, which focus on the negative consequences of human action. This is not to say that negative things do not emerge. Rather, O’Donovan framework more adequately acknowledges that the public is antecedent even to the potential negative consequences that threaten it. Because different spheres of social communication converge, society is the space where people negotiate their social life together and engage in moral inquiry about their social responsibilities with one another.<sup>578</sup>

This negotiation is only possible if there exists a representative political authority in which communities can recognize themselves and through which they can act together in a coordinated way. Thus, the coherence of communications coincides with the appearance of political authority.<sup>579</sup> If political authority should be effective, it is exercised over a “defined territory”

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<sup>575</sup> O’Donovan, 254.

<sup>576</sup> O’Donovan, 150.

<sup>577</sup> O’Donovan, 256.

<sup>578</sup> O’Donovan, 258.

<sup>579</sup> O’Donovan, 161.

that provides the form of a people's political identity.<sup>580</sup> For O'Donovan, political identity is not something sinister, arbitrary, or oppressive. Rather, political identity is necessary for effective political agency; it is necessary for a people to act together. Here, it might be helpful to remember that Hegel, a philosopher of modernity, knows this well and O'Donovan seems to be drawing from Hegel's ideas.

For Hegel, in order for a person to be free as an individual, he must be part of a larger political community in which his dignity is recognized and protected.<sup>581</sup> Furthermore, a person's freedom—as well as the legitimacy of the state—is undermined if he cannot recognize in the political structures of his society his own aspirations for a life of dignity.<sup>582</sup> In other words, a person does not create a political society with other persons as individuals. A person is, in fact, dependent on society—its laws, traditions, and social institutions—to effectively realize his freedom.<sup>583</sup> A person's freedom remains abstract and unrealized, for Hegel, until the advent of institutions that can provide the content—traditions, morality, and education—of the exercise of freedom, laws that will protect his rights and dignity, and a social identity that will help him relate the various aspects of his life in a unity or a totality.<sup>584</sup> O'Donovan echoes Hegel when he states that “there can be no freedom in having many spheres to participate in, unless one can rationally conceive of a whole that connected those spheres together.”<sup>585</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> O'Donovan, 150–51.

<sup>581</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. Alan White (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 126–27.

<sup>582</sup> Hegel, 194–97.

<sup>583</sup> Hegel, 188–93.

<sup>584</sup> See an illuminating discussion in Timothy C. Luther, *Hegel's Critique of Modernity: Reconciling Individual Freedom and the Community* (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 117–48.

<sup>585</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 71.

O'Donovan is, therefore, right in saying that the "public realm ... exists antecedent to us."<sup>586</sup> The public provides the context within which individuals act. It is the basis of the pursuit of private ends, not the other way around. This is why the public realm has an overriding seriousness when compared to private pursuits. The common good of society, Jacques Maritain also rightly argues, has priority over individuals.<sup>587</sup> This also means that people do not get to "choose" their political institutions—in the sense of choosing a commodity or signing a contract—any more than they get to choose their parents or spheres of social communication. Political institutions coincide with the emergence of a given social identity and just is the crystallization of this social identity.<sup>588</sup> One purpose of the public authority is, therefore, the defense of the common good; that is, the spheres of social communication that enables human beings to be social and so to realize their human nature. The way political institutions do this, O'Donovan argues, is the political act of judgment. But what is judgment? Do political institutions have other tasks?

The act of judgment presupposes the idea of justice or right. Justice is simply the normative condition within which social life is ordered. There are many conceptions of justice and meta-ethical theories about what it is, but in the Christian tradition, O'Donovan points out, justice is human life ordered to God's law.<sup>589</sup> That is, life aligned with God's purposes and design. God's

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<sup>586</sup> O'Donovan, 55.

<sup>587</sup> Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, 28–31; Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue*, 125–26. Aquinas writes, "If we speak of legal justice, it is evident that it stands foremost among all the moral virtues, for as much as the common good transcends the individual good of one person." See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II Q. 58, Art. 12.

<sup>588</sup> One could, of course, emigrate to another political society. But then one would have to leave a given sphere of social communication and get re-socialized into a new sphere with its own traditions, laws, and customs. Either way, migration is very different from signing a contract or purchasing a commodity, which does not affect one's social identity as a member of a people.

<sup>589</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 32.

laws are not heteronomous in the sense of being standards imposed from the outside in an authoritarian way, because Christian anthropology affirms that to be ordered to God's social design is also to be ordered to the good or *telos* of human beings.<sup>590</sup> The idea of right anticipates wrong or the violation of that human social order but does not presuppose it. However, Judgment, on the other hand, is a direct response to concrete violations of right in the social order and, thus, presupposes acts of injustice.<sup>591</sup> Judgment, for O'Donovan, is the primary and "original" political reality, because it is the purpose of political institutions.<sup>592</sup>

To define judgment, O'Donovan states that it is "an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context."<sup>593</sup> Judgment distinguishes right from wrong in response to an event or situation and effectively establishes a new legal context within which people communicate socially. When a wrong—of either harm or neglect—is done, public authority pronounces on the truth of the act and holds the parties involved accountable to the content of the pronouncement. Judgment is also forward-looking insofar as it binds the future of the community to this precedent. Judgment, therefore, both secures and creates a certain public context that is vital for human communication or holding things in common. As such, judgment is the primary means by which the human community defends itself against threats against the common good.

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<sup>590</sup> O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 10; Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, ed. Andrew Tallon, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994), 81–83. Rahner argues that in every act of human willing or valuing, God as the infinite is necessarily co-affirmed. Similarly, love of God is also at the same time love of God's creation. There is, thus, no competition between what is good for creatures and what is good in itself, God.

<sup>591</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 32.

<sup>592</sup> O'Donovan, 7.

<sup>593</sup> O'Donovan, 7.

For O'Donovan, the claim that the primary political task is judgment is a normative claim grounded in a theological worldview.<sup>594</sup> The political task as judgment presupposes that other totalitarian uses of political authority are illegitimate. Political community, according to this view, is no longer the place where human beings' ultimate identity and meaning are realized. Human identity, though irreducibly bound up with political and local associations, can no longer be contained by them. Political authority has a legitimate, but derivative claim to human loyalty.<sup>595</sup> In other words, political authority must be in some sense secular; that is, stripped of the eschatological pretensions that plague all nationalisms. However, O'Donovan argues, this conception of the political is possible only because Christians have historically believed that Christ has ascended to the right hand of the father. For Christians, Christ, not the political community, is the only legitimate bearer of ultimate human identity and traditions.<sup>596</sup> Therefore, all traditions and identities are relativized by the risen Christ. Political authority is left with only the task of judgment or the preservation of the common good because it is "marked for displacement."<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> O'Donovan, 3–4; O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 146–57.

<sup>595</sup> This is the position of John Courtney Murray and, more recently, Rowan Williams. When discussing the limits of government, Murray argues that the primacy of society over the state must be affirmed. But this presupposes that society is made up of differentiated associations of which church is one vital community among others that can keep political authority accountable. In fact, the church has unique resources for doing so, precisely because it cultivates attachments to things—such as the natural law—that transcends the political state. Similarly, Rowan Williams shows that the history of liberalism must include the history of political thought. Ideological secularism, for Williams, has the tendency to produce of monistic public that is hostile to difference. Nothing in liberalism, however, needs to be hostile to difference except that which is unwilling to respect difference. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 79–81; Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 29–30.

<sup>596</sup> O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 148.

<sup>597</sup> O'Donovan, 211–12.

In the meantime, before the eschaton, a government's responsibility to judge is still in play. This tradition of government as judgment can be seen in the Old Testament, where prophets and kings were given the task of making "justice roll down like waters," that is, to exercise judicial judgment for the sake of those who are oppressed.<sup>598</sup> The varied conceptions of justice in the Old Testament have an intimate connection with establishing a public context where wrong is righted by the act of judgment, even if by eschatological divine judgement.<sup>599</sup> This understanding of the task of a secular government, as O'Donovan points out, should not be confused with the libertarian notion of "limited government."<sup>600</sup> The righting of wrongs includes acts of governmental prudence that seeks to anticipate and to proactively address potential harms—including harms caused by social neglect—that could befall the social body as such and injure the right of citizens to be meaningful participants of social life.<sup>601</sup> In other words, judgment is about the defense of the totality of institutions, relationships, and material conditions that constitute the common good.

This means that nothing is "in principle beyond the reach of [government] intervention."<sup>602</sup> The economic actors—be it individuals or corporations—and civil society organizations can both be subjected to the discipline of government if they should threaten the common flourishing of all in a given society. This need not mean that governments become paternalistic. The question of paternalism will be addressed in the next two sections dealing with feminist ethics of care and political liberalism. At this point, it suffices to say that what interests the public take in a

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<sup>598</sup> Amos 5:24; O'Donovan, 39.

<sup>599</sup> For a detailed discussion see Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006); Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World*, trans. Seán Charles Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 95–118.

<sup>600</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 61–62.

<sup>601</sup> O'Donovan, 139.

<sup>602</sup> O'Donovan, 62.



particular state of affairs cannot be settled in advance based on the abstract consideration of whether or not something is defined as private or public in political theory. Dewey's understanding of the public, for instance, is helpful in bringing out the contextual dimensions of public authority and the necessarily flexible nature of what the public may take an interest in. However, Dewey's thought, because of his allergies towards normative anthropology, prevents him from providing a moral theory of public judgment.

Theological critics of political theory, such as Stanley Hauerwas, might still object that any theory of government risks becoming a theory of legitimation, thus taking the edge off of Christian social criticism. The concern here is that a theory of government can only help to reify existing public institutions and shelter existing national loyalties from criticism. There is some truth to this criticism. But surely, this worry does not change the fact that a moral framework is needed in order for citizens to evaluate the actions of public authority. To fail at this theoretical task without, at the same time, giving up on social criticism is to perform *arbitrary* criticism. A mediating political theory, as liberation theologians rightly insist, is necessary for Christians to render their prophetic criticism concrete.<sup>603</sup> The alternatives are abstract Christian moralism—or moral condemnation without any understanding of the concrete situation or how things might be different—or the complete evasion of pressing public issues in favor of one-sided ecclesiocentrism. Here, O'Donovan's refusal to reduce political theology to ecclesiology should be taken seriously.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 24–34.

<sup>604</sup> O'Donovan's theological focus is on grounding governmental (top-down) authority. Therefore, he is not as interested in the more bottom-up task of political criticism. Charles Mathewes rightly criticizes O'Donovan for “conflating political structures with divine ordering” too quickly and for advocating a “quietistic” political ethic of passive obedience. But in spite of this, O'Donovan's theory of judgment can be seen as a normative theory of just political power inspiring democratic criticism and participation. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 182–86.

A moral theory of public judgment is necessary to provide a context for making ethical discriminations about acts of public authority.<sup>605</sup> More importantly, to have a theory of government is not to endorse any particular institutional arrangement, but to have a transcendent horizon from which concrete criticisms can be made.<sup>606</sup> A theory of right judgment is to have a theory of political justice. For O'Donovan, public judgment is a matter of attributive justice.<sup>607</sup> Here he distinguishes himself from theorists who take equality or self-interest as starting points as in some liberal political theories. O'Donovan points out that the idea of equality is not, strictly speaking, a principle of justice, for equality by itself cannot yield determinate political principles. Proponents of equality still have to determine precisely what should be equalized. Furthermore, taken in problematic directions, equality can dissolve important social differences—such as the difference between parent and child, teacher and student—that make social life possible.<sup>608</sup>

It is quite often the case that justice can be done only when differences between people are considered. For instance, when a company is attempting to establish its healthcare and leave policy, it rightly takes the different needs between single men and mothers into account. Similarly, when a government sets up a budget, it needs to weigh the various needs of constituencies: politicians need to ask if money should be invested in building more private

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<sup>605</sup> Hauerwas insists that Christians do not need a “theory of the state,” because it necessarily legitimates government. He is happy to simply know that nation-states “exist.” The church’s job is simply, for him, to cultivate a people who are capable of interpreting the world truthfully. I am sympathetic to Hauerwas’ focus on the pedagogical aspects of church life. See Stanley Hauerwas, “Epilogue: A Pacifist Response to the Bishops,” in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, by Paul Ramsey (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 175.

<sup>606</sup> O'Donovan points out that in order to avoid legitimization, the church has to be able to identify the political anti-Christ—when governments fail to be what it is meant to be. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 214–15.

<sup>607</sup> He is here borrowing from Hugo Grotius. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 38.

<sup>608</sup> O'Donovan, 43–44.

prisons or the education of impoverished children. To treat everything equally in many cases would be to act unjustly. Neither is justice simply a matter of reciprocity (or based on the logic of exchange or contract), because goods that need distribution in society—such as education, wealth, and job opportunities—are incommensurable and impact different people differently. Equality and reciprocity do not account for the forward-looking element of justice. This kind of forward-looking justice that seeks to act in a “fitting” way is “attributive justice.”<sup>609</sup> It is not strict justice, because it requires a degree of creative discernment, prudence, and wisdom; it is about acting appropriately in the right situation.

However, equality is not, therefore, irrelevant to justice. Equality is relevant, for O’Donovan, only in the sense of the “equally infinite” worth of every human being before God.<sup>610</sup> Equality in this sense leads to three related implications that do not negate differences but provide a deeper moral context for attributive justice. First, equality of infinite worth or dignity resists any reduction of human beings to social roles or utility.<sup>611</sup> This means that it does not matter whether one is rich or poor, president of the United States or a janitor in the White House, every person has an equal moral value that transcends their social usefulness or location on the social hierarchy and, therefore, deserves to be treated by others accordingly. Second, this equality of dignity directly impinges on how a person is treated when her life is threatened. For example, O’Donovan points out that under normal conditions (i.e., non-emergency situations), a hospital

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<sup>609</sup> O’Donovan, 38.

<sup>610</sup> Drawing on Duncan Forrester, O’Donovan believes equality can only be a theological doctrine since moral equality is not grounded in human capacities. Infinite worth means “not susceptible to exchange value.” The word dignity is used to express this kind of value. O’Donovan, 40–41; Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 43–46.

<sup>611</sup> O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 43; O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 262–63.

cannot treat one patient as more morally deserving of survival than another.<sup>612</sup> Third, O'Donovan argues that when a person lacks the means to be a meaningful participant "in social communications as such"—that is, to share in the common good of society—she rightly has a claim to assistance from her fellow citizens to achieve a basic level of participation.<sup>613</sup> The purpose of political judgment is, after all, to protect any threat to the common good, which includes the basic social wellbeing of every citizen.

Later, the idea of basic justice as the ability to participate in social life will be developed in conversation with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, as one key area where Christians can work for social justice in a liberal society. O'Donovan affirms that to participate in social life is "metaphysically foundational" for human beings, such that the lack of basic opportunities in life constitutes a failure to respect human dignity.<sup>614</sup> However, he does not elaborate on what it is about human nature that makes them vulnerable to indignity and thus making their social responsibility to each other equally morally foundational.<sup>615</sup> So his account of justice can be better developed if one more explicitly connects human dignity to the reality of human interdependence. That is not to say interdependence is missing in O'Donovan's account. His account of communication as a fundamental political concept, stresses that the moral basis of human solidarity is grounded in natural human sociality. However, little attention is given to the reality of human vulnerability and dependence, concepts that are no doubt important, if only implicitly, for O'Donovan's account of attributive justice and equality. Human beings are not social only because they happen to want to be social, but because they are utterly dependent on

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<sup>612</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 44.

<sup>613</sup> O'Donovan, 45–48.

<sup>614</sup> O'Donovan, 48.

<sup>615</sup> O'Donovan, 48.

one another. It is the political significance of human interdependence that feminist care ethics illuminates.

### III. Justice as Empowerment: The Common good and Care Ethics

It is only recently that human dependency, vulnerability, and the need for care emerged as serious political concepts. Contemporary Western political theory has often relied on variations of social contract theories, which tends to paint a picture of human beings as autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient. This is partly due to the general fear of political theorists of the supposedly totalitarian or paternalistic risks of talking about the common good, solidarity, political emotions and any political concepts that might undermine basic political freedoms.<sup>616</sup> However, many feminist thinkers have begun to challenge this trajectory in Western political thought on feminist grounds and have compellingly revealed why human vulnerability, dependence, and emotions have been eclipsed.

One group of thinkers that have been associated with what is now called feminist care ethics is well-known for challenging these blind spots of mainstream liberal thought. Virginia Held traces the ethics of care back to an essay published by Sara Ruddick in 1980 called “Maternal Thinking,” placing the practice of mothering at the center of philosophical ethics for the first time.<sup>617</sup> Later, Carol Gilligan’s groundbreaking work, *In a Different Voice*, propelled ethics in new directions by challenging Lawrence Kohlberg’s influential moral psychology that assumes impersonal—some argues, Kantian—universal reason as the epitome of human moral

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<sup>616</sup> Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 3–17; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1–21.

<sup>617</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

development, while essentially associating affective attachments and the relational aspects of human existence with moral immaturity.<sup>618</sup> Gilligan's work drew a lot of criticism from other feminists for its perceived gender essentialism and failure to challenge the prevailing Kantian approach to ethics, but nevertheless, her work sparked a new development in ethics that will call dualistic accounts of practical reason that separates practical reason from emotions and concrete relationships into question.<sup>619</sup>

Joan Tronto is a great pioneer in feminist ethics in that she is among the first to systematically challenge many assumptions of mainstream political theory from the perspective of care ethics. She argues that the mainstream emphasis on autonomy, universal reason, and justice-as-fairness to the exclusion of human dependence, affection, relationality, and the need for care is not historically accidental. The Western shift from a more virtue and community-based ethics to a more abstract and rationalist approach to ethics coincides with the beginnings of globalization in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the social order shifted from a household-oriented economy to an international market order.<sup>620</sup> This social revolution disrupted face-to-face relationships and forced localities—sometimes, separated by the vast ocean—to confront each other in an unprecedented way. It is in this historical context that appeals to autonomous reason, on the one

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<sup>618</sup> Julie Anne White, *Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State: Reconstructing Public Care* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 54–62.

<sup>619</sup> Many Kantian philosophers have rightly challenged the prevailing idea that Kant is hostile to human emotions. Rather, Kant's point is, they argue, that emotions need to be rationally evaluated and so cannot, by themselves, be the foundation of moral knowledge. See Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100–116; Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 27–30; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71–80; Selma Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 50–54.

<sup>620</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 26–51.

hand, and rational economic self-interests, on the other hand, became more plausible and intuitive.

This shift in moral discourse is not without costs. Tronto points out that the move from a more community-orient moral framework to a universalistic perspective led to the systematic devaluation of human emotions and local relational attachments in ethics as well as the rigid separation between the public and the private spheres in political thought.<sup>621</sup> Both developments have negatively impacted women as emotions and affectivity became exclusively associated with women and their social role confined to the private realm as care providers.<sup>622</sup> Men, on the other hand, are seen as belonging more to the public realm of autonomy, reason, and politics. This historical context is what is responsible, according to Tronto, for the eclipse of care and interdependence as political and ethical concepts. As a result, human vulnerability, dependence, and the responsibility to provide care are completely ignored in political theorists and ethicists just as the practice of caring for others is problematically relegated to women and racial minorities in Western societies.<sup>623</sup>

Yet, the solution is not simply to ask the dominant theorists to simply include a “woman’s” perspective into their framework. Tronto argues that this move merely leaves the dominant framework, which perpetuates the myth of autonomy and its hostility toward relationality, unchallenged.<sup>624</sup> Therefore, what is needed is nothing less than a demonstration that care is not merely one political concept among others, but at the core of human social existence and should, therefore, be a central category of political ethics. To accomplish this, Tronto defines care as “a

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<sup>621</sup> Tronto, 6–11.

<sup>622</sup> Tronto, 52–56.

<sup>623</sup> Tronto, 111–24.

<sup>624</sup> Tronto, 86.

species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes us, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”<sup>625</sup> It is paramount to notice that care is not simply what one person does for another person in the private realm. The merit of this definition is that it brings to light that caring is at the core of human social existence as a social practice. No one can flourish in the contemporary context without being part of a vast life-sustaining enterprise that includes the entire society and its institutions.

From the perspective of Tronto’s ethics of care, social life is always already about taking an interest in the good of one another. As Susan Moller Okin pointed out, political theorists that take individualism or self-interest as the basis of political society simply “take for granted that whole cast sphere of life in which persons (mostly women) take care of others, often at considerable cost to their advancement as individuals.”<sup>626</sup> The responsibility to care about and for others is not something we willfully accept, but something we inherit simply because we are thrown into existing relationships that are not of our choosing. Thus, Tronto argues that, unlike liberal theorists, care ethicists do not feel the need to justify the standpoint of moral responsibility from the abstract.<sup>627</sup> Interdependence is a basic datum of human existence. She writes, “It is part of the human condition that our autonomy occurs only after a long period of dependence, and that in many regards, we remain dependent upon others throughout our lives. At the same time, we are called upon to help others, and to care as well.”<sup>628</sup> Tronto’s ethics of care

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<sup>625</sup> Tronto, 103.

<sup>626</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 88.

<sup>627</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 164.

<sup>628</sup> Tronto, 162; MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 100. Tronto’s argument parallels MacIntyre’s. MacIntyre further emphasizes that the responsibility to care “cannot be a matter of strict reciprocity ... because those to whom one is called upon to give [care] are very



rightly situates human autonomy and agency within the larger social context of empowering relationships as in O'Donovan's theology of government as judgment.<sup>629</sup>

In addition to deconstructing the liberal notion of autonomy, she calls the theoretical preoccupation with interests—rather than needs—into question. Is it not arbitrary to premise political theory on the idea of interest rather than the meeting of needs? If care is taken seriously as a normative political category, then care would constitute a central political virtue. Political and social institutions, from this standpoint, exist not only to protect the negative freedom of atomistic individuals but to positively empower people to become, as Held argues, agents capable of forming and critically reshape relationships.<sup>630</sup> This conception of political institutions has Hegelian resonances, since for Hegel, the state is “the self-conscious, official expression of that mutual dependence and the realization of freedom.”<sup>631</sup>

Tronto and Berenice Fisher describe four elements of care—corresponding to the four “phases of caring” that can serve as a moral guideline for citizens and political societies.<sup>632</sup> These elements are: 1) attentiveness or the sensitivity of individuals and institutions to the needs of others; 2) responsibility or the assuming of the burden to act in response to recognized needs;

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often not the same individuals as those from whom from received [care].” Furthermore, what some of us are called to do may be far “more demanding” than others. For MacIntyre, a basic asymmetry is to be expected in caring relationships. So, it is not a matter a strict justice.

<sup>629</sup> It should be noted that interdependence is not necessarily opposed to the Kantian understanding of autonomy. Building on Kant's legacy, Hegel likewise argues that autonomy is a social and historical achievement. Many current criticisms of Kant's position are, in my view, overstated or caricatures, to say the least. See Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*; Anselm Kyongsuk Min, “Hegel on Capitalism and the Common Good,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11, no. 39 (1986): 39–61.

<sup>630</sup> Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 14.

<sup>631</sup> Min, “Hegel on Capitalism and the Common Good,” 54.

<sup>632</sup> The four phases of care are 1) caring about (recognizing that care is needed), 2) taking care of (assuming responsibility for a need), 3) care-giving (the working to meet needs), and 4) care-receiving (the care receiver's response to care and the care provider's sensitivity to such feedback). Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 106–9.

3) competence as the third element asks whether a need is being met with sufficient resources, thoughtfulness, and skill; and 4) responsiveness asks whether institutions and care givers are adequately receptive of the voices of vulnerable others, such that the activity of caring does not become paternalistic, domineering, and condescending.<sup>633</sup> In order for political society and citizens to be morally admirable, they need to strive to integrate all four elements of care. A political ethics of care, therefore, distinguishes itself from some liberal frameworks by making the sustaining of caring political relationships a core *moral* end of society, rather than something derivative of self-interested individuals.<sup>634</sup>

Having a moral political end can, no doubt, be taken in paternalistic directions. At this point, some liberals might see the specter of totalitarian moralism haunting care ethics. However, it is important to note that the last element of care, responsiveness, is especially relevant in a democratic society where the equal dignity of individuals is taken seriously. Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, Tronto is aware of the ambiguities of defining needs and responsibilities in societies marked by cultural, religious, and ideological diversities. Therefore, the process of “understanding care” is an “ongoing and multifaceted process.”<sup>635</sup> Selma Sevenhuijsen took this in a more postmodern and hermeneutical direction.<sup>636</sup> Needs, according to Sevenhuijsen, are

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<sup>633</sup> Tronto, 127–37.

<sup>634</sup> This is also a feature of Martha Nussbaum’s political thought, which will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>635</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 139.

<sup>636</sup> Since Sevenhuijsen is a committed anti-essentialist, she is suspicious towards attempts at a theoretical description of human nature or beyond basic categories, such as interaction, interdependence, and relationships—which by themselves simply yield no ethical norms. Needs, for her, is necessarily narratively constituted. Yet, this leaves ethicists and political philosophers without even a relatively objective framework to make political judgments about what is the proper role of government or what constitutes human flourishing. It is not necessarily the case that every claim to objective human nature not relative to culture is automatically imperialistic. It is also not necessarily true that the search of a moral consensus assumes the destruction of otherness. Why should the postmodern resistance towards totalizing sameness or the postmodern

inseparable from perceptions, narratives, and the social construction of meaning.<sup>637</sup> Thus, the discovery of needs as well as the means to meet them is not something that can be determined in advance. Moral deliberation requires story-telling and negotiations.<sup>638</sup> Thus, care ethics must be aware how every discourse of needs is embedded in existing configurations of power and how a normative conception of need can be used to marginalize the concerns of the vulnerable and recipients of care.

Julie Anne White likewise agrees that paternalism is a real risk in public care. However, instead of seeing care as intrinsically paternalistic, she identifies the root of the paternalism problem in welfare services in the power gap between “service providers” and welfare “recipients.”<sup>639</sup> Since dependency and vulnerability are considered deviations from the norm of human autonomy, those who need care are often otherized by the ideological framework of traditional liberalism.<sup>640</sup> This then creates the impression that care recipients are not capable of exercising agency or deserve to have input in terms of how needs are defined and how they are to be met in different contexts.<sup>641</sup> The result of this framework is the bureaucratization and professionalization of public care that severely limits the agency of those who are vulnerable and

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agonistic politics of difference not be considered just as controversial as ethical proposals? Every ethical stance requires something that is foundational or non-negotiable. Postmodernists who want to be politically effective would need to make certain arguments based on moral foundations. The difference is that Kantians are willing to defend those foundations and postmodernists often simply assume them without any argumentation. It is also not clear that the common criticism leveled at Kant—for being a totalitarian of sameness—by postmodernists is actually fair. Richard B. Miller has recently compellingly suggested that Kantian/Rawlsian respect is a form of respect for the other—their beliefs, thick moral background, and motivations. Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, 64, 132–35; Richard B. Miller, *Friends and Other Strangers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 273–307.

<sup>637</sup> Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, 22.

<sup>638</sup> Sevenhuijsen, 28–29, 46.

<sup>639</sup> White, *Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State*, 7.

<sup>640</sup> White, 8–15.

<sup>641</sup> White, 3–5.

reinforces the notion that care providers alone know what vulnerable people needs and how they should be monitored and held accountable for their non-autonomy. In place of this model, White proposes a more democratic model of need interpretation where there is a collaborative relationship between those who need care and the public institutions that serve them.<sup>642</sup>

Here, White's work points in the direction of how care and justice can be related to each other in care ethics. Citing the Beacons school programs—a project designed to provide children with after-school activities—in New York City, White gestures at the possibility of a care framework that considers the agency of everyone involved. Unlike other traditional welfare programs, the Beacons Programs do not begin with the assumption that experts are “saviors” coming to save a helpless people from themselves.<sup>643</sup> Rather, the Programs rejects the standard “division of labor in which governance of services was done by one class of providers for a separate class of recipients.”<sup>644</sup> Every member of the community is seen as a resource in this model. This effectively breaks down the idea that professional providers have all the answers, as well as the rigid division between providers and recipients.<sup>645</sup> Beacons Programs gave agency and autonomy to existing community organizations and began with the assumption that everyone can be simultaneously recipients and providers of care.<sup>646</sup> The fluidity of roles also ensures that needs are interpreted in a dialogical and collaborative way.

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<sup>642</sup> White, 145–52.

<sup>643</sup> White, 68.

<sup>644</sup> White, 39.

<sup>645</sup> White, 42–43.

<sup>646</sup> This insight shows that a healthy political society requires a lively civil society with strong (non-state) communal institutions. Thus, recent political theology rightly emphasizes the importance of civil bonds or, in Milbank's language, “complex space.” However, this focus should not marginalize or exclude the importance of government as an organ of the common good, even with its imperfections. Civil organizations are not less likely to become sources of social misery and private domination, as Hegel has shown. So whatever criticism one could level at political institutions, one could also level at civil institutions. Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting*

It is due to these considerations of paternalism that White likewise reject political theory's role in defining human needs a priori. Needs, for White, should—in a democratic society—emerge from deliberative processes so that no special class of people can define human nature from a (supposedly) universal standpoint.<sup>647</sup> Yet, care ethicists, should they be committed to democracy, implicitly rely on a conception of equality and equal dignity, which enables them to resist parochialism and arbitrary prejudices. The problem is that without some idea of what respecting that dignity means, equality can have no determinate content or political force. To be committed to a formal deliberative process is not the same thing as to be committed to equality. There must be some goods that deliberation serves to protect and to preserve—goods such as the opportunity to shape the character of your political community. As O'Donovan argued, equality is always equality vis-à-vis something, that one is entitled to something by virtue of them being a human being.<sup>648</sup> It is certainly the case that what we believe equality constitutes will change depending in our social context and expectations.<sup>649</sup> But it does not follow from this that political theory should not strive to formulate and reformulate normative conceptions of human nature.

A political society cannot be tasked to fulfill every human need whatsoever. This would require the state to have a maximal definition of what constitutes human flourishing—something rightly ruled out by liberal modesty. Rather, its role is confined to the meeting of needs that are necessary for human social participation and basic flourishing. In this regard, the exact

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*Democracy: Faith Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 179–242; John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 268–92; William T. Cavanaugh, “‘Dispersed Political Authority’: Subsidiarity and Globalization in Caritas in Veritate,” in *Jesus Christ: The New Face of Social Progress*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 89–106; Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 147–51.

<sup>647</sup> White, *Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State*, 165–67.

<sup>648</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 48.

<sup>649</sup> White, *Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State*, 166.

relationship between care and justice is still ambiguous. Care ethicists usually conceive of the relationship between care and justice as either opposed to complementary. Those who believe that care and justice are complementary see them as applicable to different domains of moral life.<sup>650</sup> Care needs an account of human dignity—what is of fundamental political value—that can provide a wider context from which particular practices of care can be evaluated politically. Without a mediating moral category, care ethics can easily risk conceiving political society as a family writ large, something Tronto also resists.<sup>651</sup> However, without a mediating moral concept that connects care in the context of interpersonal relationships and care as a political ideal, this danger remains.<sup>652</sup>

While Tronto is right that there is nothing about care itself that necessarily leads to paternalism and parochialism, it also does not positively set limits to the role of government in caring for its citizens. Selma Sevenhuijsen's work helpfully adds the criteria of equality and hermeneutical humility when it comes to needs interpretation. These contributions mitigate the risk of paternalism by inserting, into care ethics, a basic posture of humility and respect in the face of the other. This is an important corrective to accounts of political authority, such as that of O'Donovan's, that lukewarm about democratic engagement and participation.<sup>653</sup> Care ethics to argue that political power is only legitimate if it empowers people to be fully social.

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<sup>650</sup> Even those who attempted to revise liberal "justice" categories, such as autonomy, do not usually end up elaborating a theory of justice that takes interdependence into account. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 90–104.

<sup>651</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 164.

<sup>652</sup> Tronto, 169.

<sup>653</sup> O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 176–79. O'Donovan seems to equate democracy with electoral politics and a modality of the relationship between the ruled and the rulers. However, democracy is conceived, in an ethics of care, as a social practice of accountability and social hermeneutics.

At the same time, care ethicists, because of their reluctance to integrate their framework with a theory of justice, does not offer an explanation as to what it is about human beings that deserve our respect and why they should be considered to have moral worth. Furthermore, they do not go far enough to suggest that failures of care are also failures of justice due to neglect, which is a form of wrong. Nussbaum, for instance, has argued that epistemic humility and the rejection of paternalism are themselves grounded in a universal value based on a normative understanding of what constitutes a life of dignity.<sup>654</sup> Therefore, something like moral dignity and a basic level of capabilities is necessary to provide the larger framework that could help one distinguish between domineering or empowering sort of power as well as delineate the responsibility of public authorities.<sup>655</sup>

The contribution of the ethics of care lies in the challenges it poses to liberal notions of autonomy and the idea that society is the product of individuals seeking self-benefit. In place of this, care ethicists propose that society be seen as a network of relations where human vulnerability and interdependence is given institutional expression and recognition. In addition, care ethicists also compellingly show that democratic deliberation and dialogue is the best way to ensure that care does not become paternalistic. What it lacks, however, is precisely O'Donovan's theory of government as judgment—the righting of wrongs—and Nussbaum's proposal of a minimal list of human capabilities in order to give political shape to care. These ideas would no doubt appear too foundationalist to a strict anti-foundationalists like Sevenhuijsen, yet the rejection of epistemic foundationalism does not necessarily entail that there should be no fundamental ethical principles—that is, an account of what is most morally valuable (e.g., human

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<sup>654</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 51–52.

<sup>655</sup> Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, 66.

begins as ends in themselves)—nor does it mean that a normative account of human nature is out of the question. It is to Nussbaum's account that the next section is dedicated.

#### IV. The Common Good and Human Capabilities

Nussbaum is well known for developing what is now called the capabilities approach with Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. She took the best of Rawlsian liberalism, Aristotelian anthropology, and feminist political thought and creatively formulated a new liberal political ethics that is more sensitive to human interdependence and vulnerabilities. *Frontiers of Justice* is Nussbaum's most comprehensive work of political theory. In it, she reformulates liberalism takes it in a new direction by emphasizing the fundamentally moral nature of political society. Here, she overcomes the limits of what Eric Gregory calls realist liberalism and Rawlsian liberalism, namely versions of liberalism that emphasizes the negative responsibility of political society—to restrain sin and promote individual freedoms taken in the abstract.<sup>656</sup> Against the social contract tradition, Nussbaum does not take individuals in the state of nature as the starting point of her liberal political philosophy. Rather, she desires to broaden the scope of political liberalism by incorporating ideas developed by thinkers as wide-ranging as Hugo Grotius, Aristotle, and Marx.

Nussbaum is indebted to and highly appreciative of the classical social contract tradition of Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Yet, she sees, in them, the same limitations that arise from the problematic assumptions of their political philosophy. According to Nussbaum, they are as

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<sup>656</sup> I share Gregory's sympathies for the ethics of care as well as feminist liberals such as Nussbaum. However, as Gregory points out, whether Rawlsian liberals must necessarily embrace atomistic individualism is itself a contested issue among liberal feminists. Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Live*, 82–107.



follows: 1) individuals who come together to make a social contract are understood to be independent (as opposed to be vulnerable and dependent) and roughly equal in intellectual and physical power as well as resources; 2) Furthermore, they are, for the most part, mutually disinterested; 3) these same individuals are only making a social contract with others for the purpose of advancing their own conception of the good.<sup>657</sup> Thus, the question of their moral relationship with one another outside of mutual advantage is largely left out. These assumptions make liberalisms that depend on social contract theories, such as that of Rawls, remarkably bad at dealing with three interrelated problems: 1) the full inclusion of those who are mentally and physically impaired in the political community as equal citizens; 2) the asymmetry of power between states in an increasingly globalizing world; and 3) human beings' relationship with non-human species.<sup>658</sup>

Nussbaum traces the source of these limitations to the absence of an account of human nature that is already marked by natural sociality and a concern for human dignity.<sup>659</sup> Thus, she applauds Rawls for including in his theory of the original position—in the form of the veil of ignorance—a moral concept of fairness as a “good in itself.”<sup>660</sup> But, the idea of fairness—which is implicitly Kantian—is still eclipsed by the idea of mutual advantage.<sup>661</sup> So the natural moral ties between people still arrive too late for Nussbaum. She, therefore, sets out to retain some of the moral intuition of Rawlsian liberalism, which stipulates that human beings have inviolable dignity while discarding the fiction of the initial (pre-political) situation of rough equality and

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<sup>657</sup> Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 26–35.

<sup>658</sup> Nussbaum, 14–22. This chapter only focuses on the first problem.

<sup>659</sup> Nussbaum, 42–45.

<sup>660</sup> Nussbaum, 57.

<sup>661</sup> Nussbaum, 58.

mutual advantage.<sup>662</sup> For Nussbaum, it is necessary to think of the goal of society as to secure “threshold level of [basic human capabilities] beneath which it is held that truly human functioning is not available to citizens.”<sup>663</sup> In other words, the reason why people enter the social contract is so that everyone’s human dignity—here interpreted as the ability to live a human life—can be secured. A political society can, thus, be understood as a natural result of human sociality.

By incorporating a moral anthropology, however, Nussbaum departs from the mainstream of political liberalism. She breaks from Rawls by assuming the contracting parties to be morally interested in human dignity and flourishing and departs from Kant by modifying his more rationalist account of dignity. Here, she follows Marx and Aristotle by uniting the idea of human dignity with the concrete material needs of human flourishing as well as their natural moral interest in one another. To live a life worthy of human dignity is to have the real opportunity to develop key human capabilities and to have certain basic freedoms in society.<sup>664</sup> This break may seem dramatic, but she insists that her framework is still liberal insofar as it is a “free-standing” conception of politics and can be reasonably expected to become “the object of an overlapping-consensus” in a liberal society where religious, moral, and cultural pluralism is given and generally respected.<sup>665</sup>

Nussbaum’s list of capabilities that makes life worthwhile is ever evolving and is not meant to be a definitive understanding of human nature. It includes “life,” “bodily health,” “bodily integrity,” “senses, imagination, and thought” (this implies a right to education, freedom

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<sup>662</sup> Nussbaum, 64–67.

<sup>663</sup> Nussbaum, 71.

<sup>664</sup> Nussbaum, 159–62.

<sup>665</sup> Nussbaum, 163.

of expression and thought) “emotions” (the ability to form meaningful attachments), “practical reason,” freedom to form “affiliations,” being able to form relationships with “other species,” and “control over one’s environment.”<sup>666</sup> Her focus on capabilities rather than resource (e.g., wealth) distribution has clear advantages. First, capabilities do better justice to human vulnerability, dependence, and the various contingent contexts in which people find themselves. This makes her theory an easy ally of the ethics of care. Since people are vulnerable in different ways and suffer different physical, mental, and social limitations, resource or wealth redistribution cannot guarantee that the needs of everyone very will be met.<sup>667</sup> So the capabilities approach is less about the equal redistribution of resources and more about the concrete possibilities of human flourishing, which might require unequal treatment in many cases. This is another example of attributive justice conditioned by the moral concept of equal moral worth.

Second, more so than the negative liberties, the capabilities list brings to the surface the material and social conditions of freedom. The ability to exercise free speech and freedom of religion, for instance, requires basic education, protections against violent reprisals, and a safe civil society apart from governmental control.<sup>668</sup> This is also Nussbaum’s answer to libertarians who might accuse her capabilities approach of tending towards authoritarian paternalism. She shows that every basic liberal right requires social institutions—such as public schools, hospitals, the rule of law, and law enforcement—in order to become concrete.<sup>669</sup> So, paternalism in the sense of the state providing the positive social and material conditions of freedom is a liability of every theory that takes basic civil liberties seriously. However, Nussbaum’s emphasis on

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<sup>666</sup> Nussbaum, 76–78.

<sup>667</sup> Nussbaum, 165–66.

<sup>668</sup> Nussbaum writes that when the conditions of freedom are not met, “there is merely a simulacrum of choice.” Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 53–55.

<sup>669</sup> Nussbaum, 53.

capabilities is better suited to show that social empowerment of individuals is implicitly present even in the most libertarian political philosophies. Thus, libertarians would do well to abandon their truncated individualistic understanding of human freedom.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach also thickens Rawlsian political liberalism by measuring the justice of social institutions by the "outcomes" they generate, rather than on whether the proper procedures have been followed.<sup>670</sup> Therefore, it is a theory that overcomes the dichotomy of the right and the good in traditional accounts of liberalism.<sup>671</sup> For Nussbaum, the rights in question are precisely the rights to certain goods and liberties. This makes her theory capable of addressing the power inequalities in society that might contribute to the inequitable distribution of capabilities, such as situations where children in a poor neighborhood are not getting the education they need, even if this situation is not the direct result of anyone's negative right being violated. Political societies are judged on whether or not their citizens have the actual opportunities to live a dignified life with the freedoms and opportunities implied. In other words, the capabilities approach gives determination to the proper exercise of attributive justice or government as judgment. Nussbaum's version of liberalism is, therefore, also a theory of the common good even if she might not characterize it that way. Political society and civic friendship are goods in themselves within which the good of each individual is found. Like Hegel's political philosophy, the freedom of the individual and the demands of political society are just so reconciled.

At this point, some might still find Nussbaum's liberal program too controversial and too confident about its stated universalist ambitions. In her earlier works, *Women and Development*

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<sup>670</sup> Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 83.

<sup>671</sup> Nussbaum, 163.

and *Sex and Social Justice*, she compellingly dispels such worries. One form this worry takes is that Nussbaum's version of liberalism is simply another instance of the illegitimate universalization of contingent Western values, values not shared by the rest of the world. This concern is puzzling for two reasons. One is that the concern about the alleged Western imperialism of all universalistic frameworks is at least grounded in the implicit belief that alterity should be respected.<sup>672</sup> One could, therefore, justifiably ask what the source of this concern of respect is. Is not some account of liberal respect implicit in such worries? If so, it is odd that an account of the liberal respect of individuals should raise such worries, especially given the widespread popularity of human rights language, because of its effectiveness in battling against arbitrary domination and imperialism.<sup>673</sup> The appearance of rights language in many cultures should call narratives that frame the issue in the form of self-contained liberal Western culture verses self-contained illiberal non-Western cultures into question.<sup>674</sup>

Beyond the inherent risks of a universalist framework, however, Christians have others concerns about liberalism. Like the postmodern agonists discussed in the second chapter, many Christians have criticized the liberal framework for being exclusive of the public dimensions of religion, for being too individualistic, for thinning out public culture of moral resources, and for being too ideologically rigid to be critical of itself. It is to some of these objections that I turn in the next section.

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<sup>672</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 51.

<sup>673</sup> Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 61–62; Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 41–46.

<sup>674</sup> This view is reminiscent of the controversial thesis of the supposed “clash of civilizations.” See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

## V. Can Christians be Liberal?

Liberalism is often considered, by theologians, to be necessarily ideological, because it sees religious beliefs to be contestable while sheltering liberalism from being radically criticized. Charles Mathewes articulates this concern by suggesting that liberalism only permits what it sees as “common sense” into the public sphere and, thus, its own assumptions are “unassailable.”<sup>675</sup> Skeptics of liberalism often see Rawls’ distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines to be indicative of such rigidity an arrogance.<sup>676</sup> However, Liberalism as a normative political doctrine is not and should not be considered value neutral. As Richard B. Miller argues, democratic deliberation does not happen in a “value-neutral sphere” and the debate itself is a “rule-governed” activity, rules that are consistent with democratic values and intuitions.<sup>677</sup> A political liberal does not necessarily argue that liberalism is compatible with every worldview. She does take a stand—controversial or otherwise—on what constitutes a reasonable democratic ethos given the reality of religious and moral diversity. Liberalism would, therefore, rightly seek to marginalize certain public religious expressions should they contradict democratic ideals.

A core conviction of liberalism, as seen in Rawls’ and Nussbaum’s works, is that individuals should be treated as ends in themselves by political institutions and by other citizens.<sup>678</sup> This implies that citizens are expected to embrace certain basic rights and freedom for others, even if they might not wish to exercise these rights and freedom themselves. Certainly, this is a controversial moral position vis-à-vis other illiberal political doctrines. No society can or should

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<sup>675</sup> Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 111, 268–69.

<sup>676</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 59–61.

<sup>677</sup> Miller, *Friends and Other Strangers*, 306.

<sup>678</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 55.

tolerate all political projects. Mathewes himself points out, against agonists, that when it comes to politics there are genuine enemies, as opposed to mere agonistic adversaries.<sup>679</sup> If one takes liberalism to be a morally admirable project and vision, then one would have to consider other positions morally dubious and, in some cases, unreasonable. The fantasy of an all-inclusive public sphere is indeed utopian and, at the end of the day, anti-political.

Murray also incisively shows that political community is only possible given some consensus about public philosophy.<sup>680</sup> Liberalism is a stance that Christians have good reasons to accept, given the fact of pluralism and, for instance, the general Christian commitment to people's freedom to leave and enter different forms of religious association. This does not necessarily presuppose individualistic anthropology that philosophically separates a person from his or her thick communal belonging—as Sandel argues.<sup>681</sup> Rather, it is to acknowledge that people already do, from time to time, leave their thick religious associations and enter others. Liberalism takes the further step to affirm that people should have the freedom to do so without legal punishment or violent repercussions.<sup>682</sup> In other words, protection of the individual is precisely designed to safeguard the possibility of the coexistence of communities with different conceptions of the good.<sup>683</sup> Liberalism is thus committed, as Nussbaum points out, to the moral ideal that each

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<sup>679</sup> Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 273.

<sup>680</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 88.

<sup>681</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 59–65.

<sup>682</sup> Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 236–42. In response to Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of liberalism, Jeffrey Stout insightfully shows there is no reason why a contemporary Aristotelian cannot affirm a qualified and tentative conception of a "common purpose" in a liberal society that overlaps with core liberal principles.

<sup>683</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 134; Richard B. Miller, *Casuistry and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 99.

person is “worthy of concern” and irreducible to the communities to which they happen to belong.<sup>684</sup>

There is no reason for a Christian to reject such an ideal. On the contrary, the Christian commitment to the dignity and freedom of the individual requires Christians to embrace such a vision. Contrary to the idea that liberalism thins out public culture, liberalism in fact makes a flourishing, independent, civil society possible. As Miller argues, the limited political identity liberalism fosters “provide space for identities to be shaped by common pursuits.”<sup>685</sup> Liberalism is a mediating public philosophy that can foster a unique form of trans-confessional solidarity. Nussbaum’s inquiry into political emotions is one example of how a liberal might leverage the idea of civic friendship to support the moral core of liberalism. Furthermore, Nussbaum’s work, as well as the work of many feminists who continue to defend liberal ideals, show that liberalism as a tradition is itself a field of rigorous self-criticism.<sup>686</sup> Christians can and should be engaged in their own criticism of liberalism and this can be done without giving up on liberal ideals.

Though the popularity of political liberalism has waned in some theological circles, it is doubtful that there are genuine alternatives to liberalism understood as a set of tentative political values. Agonism, for instance, is helpful in describing what political struggles looks like, but it is hard to see it as a positive normative political program, as argued in chapter two. Surely, many agonists would not suppose that some kind of Christendom or other theocratic programs is desirable, even as a result of agonistic political struggles. If they reject Christendom politics, they would have to provide philosophical and ethical reasons as to why we should reject such

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<sup>684</sup> Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 63.

<sup>685</sup> Miller, *Casualty and Modern Ethics*, 99.

<sup>686</sup> Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 235–36. Stout insightfully shows that liberalism “comes in many forms,” many of which have nothing to do with the ontological individualism communitarians rightly criticize.



options. However, this would require them to justify their normative political beliefs and try to form a new overlapping consensus, not unlike what political liberals do on behalf of political liberalism. It is obviously true that at any one moment, there is a plurality of political visions in a given society contending for general acceptance. But the problem with agonism is that it gives no criteria as to which vision should be selected on the grounds that universal visions are, by nature, anti-political. It should be made clear, however, what is truly anti-political is the refusal to take a stance for or against a normative political vision.

Christians who are suspicious of liberalism as a normative political program can and should criticize it or propose an alternative positive vision. In this regard, O'Donovan is at least intellectually honest in advocating for a version of the political supremacy of the church. Christians who reject O'Donovan's option, however, will undoubtedly embrace some of the limits put forward by liberalism—limits such as that imposed by public reason and anti-establishment religious freedom—even if they might justify these limits on thicker theological grounds. But that is just the point, the political values of liberalism can be free-standing. This is also a good opportunity to dismiss another confusion.

To accept liberalism as a good framework for secular politics is also not to deny that Christianity does make important contributions to politics. Christianity can reinforce the moral ideal of human dignity, the penultimate nature of political community, as well as the cultivation of citizens who are committed to a moral way of life in the face of threats against the political order. In fact, Christians have good reasons to think, as Murray did, that liberalism as a political doctrine cannot flourish without such thick religious communities always keeping the totalizing

tendencies of the political in check and thus keeping liberal societies liberal.<sup>687</sup> Neither should anything in liberal theory stop a Christian from affirming that political life is also an analogy of the body of Christ and work to strengthen civil love and for a just political order within which the needs of the poor and vulnerable are more adequately met. No doubt, Christians can continue to do the same without giving up on liberalism's best aspirations.

## VI. Conclusion

Liberalism accepts the Christian understanding that political society cannot be the source of all human meaning. However, Christians must reject the individualism that underlies many versions of liberalism. Nussbaum's alternative constitutes a better option for Christians. A Christian acknowledges the transcendent role of the church in relation to political society. Yet, Christian spirituality is about the concrete realization of transcendence in history. The church bears witness to a reality that transcends history, whereas political society is where Christians learn to be Christians. The moral aspirations of liberalism will come under the pressure of exigency and external threats. At this point, religion must cultivate a sense of something transcendent, something more at stake than simple survival. Nussbaum is aware of this need and this is perhaps why she talks about the cultivation of political emotions and virtues that would enable citizens to broaden their moral horizons without denying their particularity.

Yet, human dignity is itself not a self-evident idea. Something thicker is indeed required to sustain an account of political life that is liberal and tolerant. Here Christians and liberal thinkers like Nussbaum can indeed join the struggle together to make the world more befitting of human

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<sup>687</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 46–57. This dissertation provides an account of how this might be done in chapter three.

dignity. With liberals, Christians must also resist paternalism, because the task of political society is to defend the common good. Christians believe that the state is not in the business of enforcing a comprehensive conception of the good life be it religious or not. A political society can only ask citizens to respect human interdependence and to help secure a basic threshold of human flourishing so that each person and community can pursue different conceptions of the good life within limits. In Nussbaum's work, Christians can discern the movement of the liberating spirit of God attempting to realize a world that is more befitting of human dignity. Christians should therefore not be afraid to find in liberal thinkers such as Nussbaum and the ethicists of care partners in the defense of the political common good.

## **Conclusion:**

This dissertation tried to develop a theological model of the common good that could hopefully, support robust Christian democratic engagement while avoiding political idolatry. The perennial problems of political life seem to push people in the opposite directions of apathy—especially among those who are privileged—and overinvestment. Overinvestment here does not mean too much passion. Rather, it means the confusion of the kingdom of God with an existing political settlement or project. The twin dangers of apathy and overinvestment, therefore, correspond to myopic conservatism and despairing utopianism. Conservatism is myopic because it fails to take a critical attitude towards the existing state of affairs and is blind to the needs of the “others” of a political community. Utopianism is despairing because it aims for the historically impossible and so quickly leads to disappointment. While utopianism might energize political movements, it can also lead to the suppression of criticism as well as paralysis. Both dangers undermine the real political task of creating a life in the political community.

Chapter one dealt with the politics of idolatry in the form of nationalism. By engaging with Khan, it explored the Augustinian observation that politics is undergirded by common objects of love and devotion. Therefore, it is not possible to separate politics from questions about the good. If politics is about the goods that unify a political community then, as Stanley Hauerwas, William T. Cavanaugh, and Paul W. Kahn have shown, it inevitably raises theological questions about what is ultimately sacred or good. While many theologians have grappled with the theological dimensions of politics, only Kahn adequately brings them to the surface by showing that politics is about the existential struggle for identity and lasting meaning. Kahn’s phenomenology of citizenship demonstrates that the nation-state can become the ultimate

foundation of meaning. This is because the nation-state is often the most embrative and during carrier of social meaning that draws our loyalty and affections.

By default, then, if meaning were to be preserved, the nation-state must persist and survive by any means necessary. Therefore, chapter one argued that absent transcendent goods that can override or relativize the authority of earthly communities and political projects, political communities risk becoming the ultimate object of love and devotion. This chapter showed that this risk carries other dark implications. Should the nation-state become the ultimate object of love, the moral fabric of a political community and critical democratic discourse can and will always be sacrificed for the sake of national security and the preservation of national identity. Thus, in order to cultivate the democratic virtues of remembrance, truthfulness, and hospitality, citizens must cultivate loyalty or commitment to a telos that transcends the nation-state.

Chapter two explored how postmodern agonism or radical democracy might deal with the problems of political idolatry and the need to generate more ethical forms of political solidarity. To this end, William E. Connolly's and Romand Coles' political philosophies were discussed at length. Agonism is a promising political program because it focuses on building networks of political belonging that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state. It is also more aware than mainstream liberalism of the political fault lines that cut through a particular nation-state and thus rightly deconstructs the myth that political communities are made of a culturally and morally homogenous citizenry. Following the main trajectories of agonism, Connolly and Coles defend a humbler political ethics that seeks to relativize cultural identities and moral traditions. Both are suspicious of grand meta-narratives that seek to give a comprehensive explanation of political causes and offer simple-minded solutions. Instead, they favor a more dialogical and

self-critical politics that freely incorporates insights from multiple moral and religious traditions for democratic renewal.

Connolly and Coles aptly deconstruct the politics of identity that is so prevalent to nationalist ideologies, but they end up chopping off the branches they sit on by appealing to an understanding of human subjectivity that seems to stand behind every meta-narrative and conception of the good. Curiously enough, without explicitly inhabiting any moral tradition (besides, perhaps, from a form of neo-Nietzscheanism), they continue to defend liberal values, such as freedom, democracy, and equality. As a result, the ethical core of their political program seems arbitrary. Without an account of the good that could contend with the ideologies of nationalism and globalization, Connolly's and Coles' project seems unable to generate the sort of loyalties needed to weather the threats and conflicts radical democracy will inevitably confront. Despite its advantages, it is doubtful that agonism can contend with the twin problems of political idolatry and apathy.

After bringing the twin problematics of political idolatry and apathy, chapter three constructed a theological theory of the common good capable of encouraging political solidarity without engendering political idolatry. It began by challenging Jacques Maritain's theology of transcendence that seems to rob the material world of politics of religious significance. His political theology of the common good, thus, leads to political apathy. Yet, Maritain is correct to argue that without a transcendent common good, human beings risk becoming subordinated to political society, as in totalitarian and nationalistic models of political life. This is the problem of political idolatry. Therefore, a theology of the common good, chapter three argued, must avoid political idolatry without setting up a dualism between the world and the kingdom of God.

Chapter three, then, developed a trinitarian theology of the common good that can affirm the intrinsic worth of political activity while avoiding the problem of political idolatry. Robert W. Jenson's trinitarian theology provided the basic structure of a theology of the common good by providing an account of the internal relationship between the world and the kingdom of God as well as between the church and society. In Jenson's theological scheme, history is where the kingdom of God is manifested. At the same time, no political or ecclesial community can be considered to be identical to the kingdom of God. The church's task is to use its prophetic voice to unsettle the political status quo so that God's justice and freedom can penetrate every level of human reality. The eschatological good of the kingdom of God, therefore, cannot be separated from politics, because the kingdom is precisely the world—including the world of politics—integrated into the life of God. This chapter further argued that this prophetic model of politics is preferable to that of agonism in that Christian ethics of epistemic generosity and dialogical humility is grounded in a thicker account of the good capable of challenging political idolatry.

Chapter four built on the argument of chapter three by further elaborating on the relationship between the church and the world. The goal was to show that political engagement is constitutive of the church's identity. It sought to address the political apathy that follows from certain forms of postliberal theologies. It, therefore, began by examining Stanley Hauerwas' social ethics. Hauerwas is suspicious of the church's involvement in the political sphere because he worries that it might erode the identity of the church by drawing the church's attention away from the Christian conception of reality. The greatest contribution of the church to the world, for Hauerwas, is a different way of being in the world that challenges the presuppositions of the world's governments and other social institutions.

However, this chapter showed that postliberal theologians like Hauerwas—such as D. Stephen Long and John Milbank—tend to downplay that porousness of the boundaries of the church and hold to an ahistorical understanding of the church's identity. Drawing from Kathryn Tanner's and Mary McClintock Fulkerson's theories of culture, this chapter argued that the church's identity is always crafted using materials of the wider culture. In addition, it is shown that postliberal theologians do not sufficiently take into account that the church is merely one node of wider fields of social communication, such that it is never isolated from the problems of the larger society. Issues of power, class, race, and gender cut through the church just as they divide the larger society. Therefore, the approach of liberation theologians, such as that Joerg Rieger, Clodovis Boff, José Míguez Bonino should be favored. Drawing on them, this chapter demonstrated that the integrity of the church hinges on its active engagement with the moral issues that afflict the larger society. Failure to do may lead to the ideological cooption of the church by the political status quo as well as the betrayal of the gospel commitment that God is found in the faces of the poor and the oppressed.

Chapters three and four outlined a theology of the common good and justifies Christian political participation. But they left the political content of the common undeveloped. However, politically engaged Christians must operate with a fuller conception of the public and the common good. Therefore, chapter five's task was to provide such an account. An adequate theory of the public must define the responsibilities and limits of government as well as the goals that Christians and other citizens might strive for in a democratic society. To this end, this chapter drew on the works of John Dewey and Oliver O'Donovan to develop an account of public authority tasked with the purpose of righting wrongs, including wrongs of neglect. Resourcing feminist ethicists of care, such as Joan Tronto Julie Anne White, and Selma



Sevenhuijsen, it showed that political society has a responsibility to empower citizens to flourish and that this can be done without anti-liberal paternalism, thus dispelling the standard liberal worry that a government that cares undermines freedom.

However, feminists care ethicists are apprehensive about developing an account of political justice that connects with the idea of care as political responsibility. Similarly, they are also suspicious of discussions about human nature, because of its perceived essentialist overtones. Martha Nussbaum's work on the capabilities approach, however, shows that a normative understanding of human nature is necessary to an adequate account of justice that takes human flourishing seriously. Her approach to political ethics elegantly brings together the reality of human interdependence with political justice, thus providing a powerful account of the common good that can be appropriated by Christians. This shows that Christians do not have to give up on political liberalism, broadly conceived as a big-tent political tradition. This chapter ends by dismissing some common Christian doubts about liberalism's ability to incorporate the criticisms of its theological critics. The hope is to help Christians see that radical engagement does not depend on a utopian rejection of what is historically given; that Christians can still make a real difference within liberal societies.

This goal of this dissertation is to develop the basic elements of a theology of the common good capable of moving beyond the twin dangers of political idolatry and apathy. In the process, elements of theological anthropology and a normative understanding of political society also began to take shape. The picture of human nature examined here is radically interdependent, vulnerable, and infused with erotic desire in search of a proper object of love. It is the hope of the author that this theological anthropology can be further developed by interacting with the works of recent feminist theologians of *eros*, such as Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima

Brock. Interacting with their work holds the potential to provide a fuller theological vision capable of addressing pressing political issues, such as economic justice, environmental degradation, health care distribution, as well as international justice in the future.<sup>688</sup>

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<sup>688</sup> Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984); Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989); Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008).

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